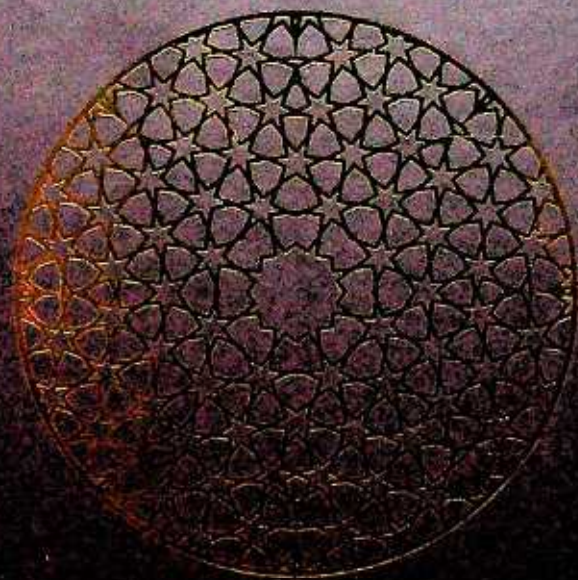


VOLUME 5

TREATISES OF
IMAM
AL-GHAZĀLĪ



IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ
ON KNOWLEDGE

TRANSLATED BY KHALID WILLIAMS

IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON KNOWLEDGE contains the texts that are most concerned with the subject of knowledge: its differing levels, the means by which it is sought, its functions, and its benefits as well as its dangers. Some knowledge must be withheld from all but a few; some knowledge does more harm than good; some knowledge requires a long and arduous ascent to attain; some knowledge is not transmitted by anyone but God Himself; and no knowledge is of any use unless it is paired with faith, for that is where salvation lies. In these treatises al-Ghazālī examines these questions and shares the conclusions to which a lifetime of seeking have led him.

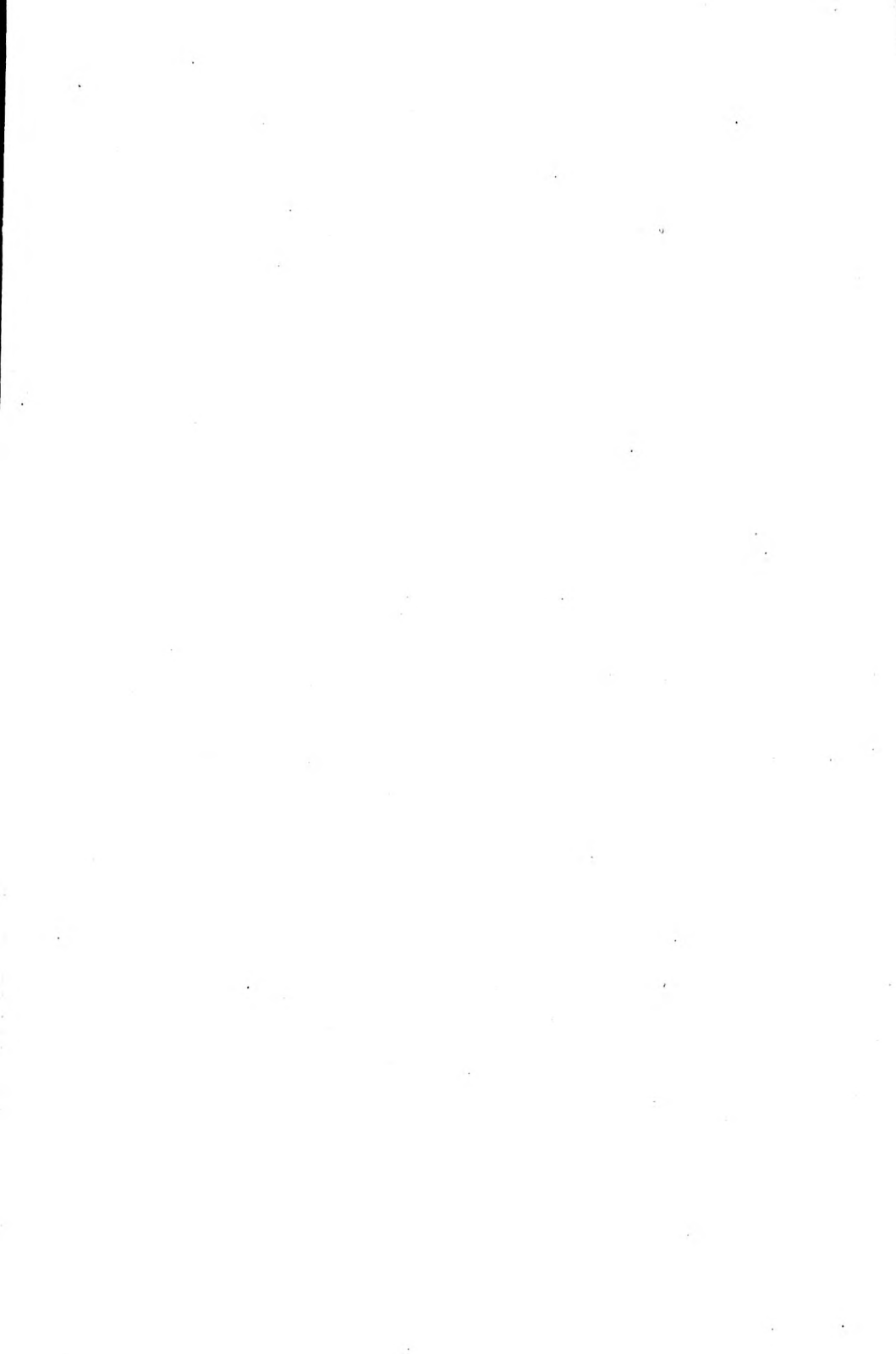
The contents of this selection are: *al-Risāla al-laduniyya* ("God-Given Knowledge"), *Mā'ārij al-sālikin* ("The Ascensions of the Travelers"), *Qānūn al-ta'wil* ("Rules of Interpretation"), and *Iljām al-'awāmm* ("Protection of the Masses from Theology"), believed to be the author's last work.

Imam Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111 CE) is unquestionably among the foremost figures in the spiritual literature of Islam—and indeed of the entire world. Until now, however, many of his writings have only been accessible to those able to read Arabic. With the appearance in fluent English translations of this collection of Imam al-Ghazālī's shorter treatises, Ihya Publishing has taken an important step to fill the gap.



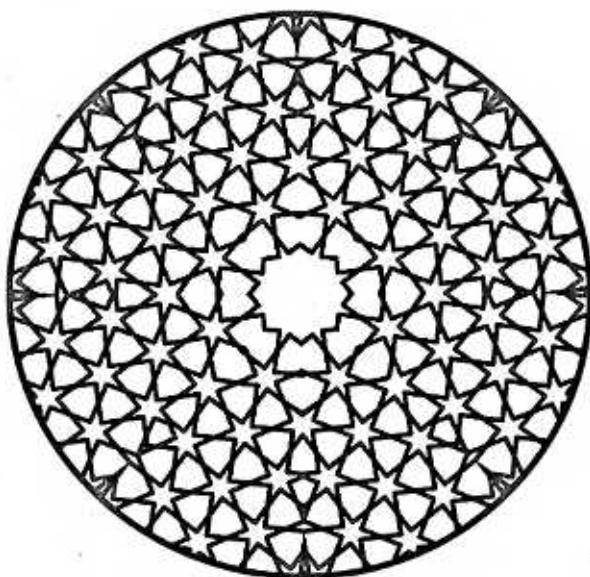
*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

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*Be joyous only for an increase in knowledge or in good works,
for they are your two companions who will accompany
you in your grave when your family, wealth,
children and friends stay behind.*

IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ

TRANSLITERATION KEY

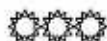
ا (u) ' (A slight catch in the breath. It is also used to indicate where the <i>hamza</i> has been dropped from the beginning of a word.)	ق q (A guttural <i>q</i> sound with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)
ا a, ā	ك k
ب b	ل l
ت t	م m
ث th (Should be pronounced as the <i>th</i> in <i>thin</i> or <i>thirst</i> .)	ن n
ج j	و w, ū, u.
ح h (Tensely breathed <i>h</i> sound.)	ه h
خ kh (Pronounced like the <i>ch</i> in Scottish <i>loch</i> with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	ي y, ī, i
د d	سalla 'Lāhu 'alayhi wa sallam—used following the mention of the Messenger Muḥammad, translated as, "May Allāh bless him and give him peace."
ذ dh (Should be pronounced as the <i>th</i> in <i>this</i> or <i>that</i> .)	س'Alayhi 'l-salām—used following the mention of a prophet or messenger of Allāh, translated as, "May the peace of Allāh be upon him."
ر r	سRaḍiya 'Lāhu 'anhu—used following the mention of a Companion of the Messenger, translated as, "May Allāh be pleased with him."
ز z	سRaḍiya 'Lāhu 'anhā—used following the mention of a female Companion of the Messenger, translated as, "May Allāh be pleased with her."
س s	سRaḥimahu 'Lāh—used following the mention of a scholar or pious individual, translated as, "May Allāh have mercy on him."
ش sh	سRaḥimahumu 'Lāh—used following the mention of more than one scholar or pious individual, translated as, "May Allāh have mercy on them."
ص s (A heavy <i>s</i> pronounced far back in the mouth with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	
ض d (A heavy <i>d/dh</i> pronounced far back in the mouth with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	
ط t (A heavy <i>t</i> pronounced far back in the mouth with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	
ظ z (A heavy <i>dh</i> pronounced far back in the mouth with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	
ع 'a, 'i, 'u (Pronounced from the throat.)	
غ gh (Pronounced like a throaty French <i>r</i> with the mouth hollowed to produce a full sound.)	
ف f	



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*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON KNOWLEDGE

In *Imam al-Ghazālī on Knowledge* we have selected the texts from the author's collected treatises that are most concerned with the subject of knowledge: its differing levels, the means by which it is sought, its functions, and its benefits as well as its dangers. Some knowledge must be withheld from all but a few; some knowledge does more harm than good; some knowledge requires a long and arduous ascent to attain; some knowledge is not transmitted by anyone but God Himself; and no knowledge is of any use unless it is paired with faith, for that is where salvation lies. In these treatises al-Ghazālī examines these questions and shares the conclusions to which a lifetime of seeking has led him.

God-Given Knowledge (*al-Risāla al-laduniyya*)

In this treatise, al-Ghazālī responds to a query from a friend of his who had encountered a cleric who objected to the concept of *‘ilm ladunī*, literally “presence-knowledge,” the God-given knowledge to which the Sufis lay claim and to which they afford a higher status than any of the sciences transmitted by conventional instruction.

The term is Qur'ānic, originating in Sūrat al-Kahf in the verse: *Then they found one of Our servants whom We had given mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence* (Qur'ān 18:65). Khidr received certain knowledge directly from God which caused him to act in a manner that Moses ﷺ found inexplicable, since he was not privy to that knowledge. The claim to such knowledge is controversial, since it is difficult to differentiate between true and false claims. Al-Ghazālī proceeds to examine the issue, beginning with a definition of knowledge, which requires also a description of its seat, the human soul. He asserts that the immortal soul derives satisfaction from knowledge alone, and that all other things are no more than secondary concerns to it. The more the soul is purified, the more it is concerned with knowledge of God above all else.

Al-Ghazālī then turns to the two categories of knowledge: religious and intellectual. He affirms that these categories overlap when they are properly understood, which leads to a third category, that of Sufi knowledge. Having given an overview of these categories, he next describes the methods of their acquisition: human instruction, and divine instruction. He likens the human teacher to a farmer who tends to the seed of potential knowledge that is already planted in the soul of the learner until it slowly sprouts into actuality. However, there is another source of human instruction in the form of contemplation, which is also to learn "from outside," not from a human teacher but instead from the Universal Soul itself, which is "a more powerful teacher than any scholar or intellectual."

Divine instruction lies beyond this, and also has two aspects: Revelation (*wahy*), which is reserved for the Prophets and Messengers, and inspiration (*ilhām*), which is not exclusive to them. Al-Ghazālī refers to the vehicles of these modes of instruction as the Universal Spirit and the Universal Soul respectively. Inspiration

is "the remnant of Revelation," an allusion to the Unseen, while Revelation is a direct communication of it. Inspiration is what is meant by *‘ilm ladunī*, the God-given knowledge from which the treatise takes its name; "that which is acquired without mediation between the soul and the Creator...like illumination from the lamp of the Unseen falling upon a heart that is pure, undisturbed, and transparent." The door to Revelation is closed because religion was perfected and culminated with the advent of Islam; but the door to inspiration will never be closed, since "souls will always be in need of affirmation, renewal, and reminder."

The author then explains how souls have differing levels with regard to the acquisition of knowledge, and some souls are prevented from reaching what others reach, whether by worldly circumstance or spiritual inadequacy, failing to rise above the density of bodily existence. These are maladies which the Prophets and saints, physicians of the soul, were sent to treat. With their help and with the aid of contemplation, the soul can be cured of this ailment and "return to its origin and primal nature, discover its secrets, and bring out what lies within it from potentiality into actuality," becoming purified and illuminated. This, says al-Ghazālī, is "the true objective of all of the human race."

The Ascensions of the Travelers (*Ma‘ārij al-sālikīn*)

In this treatise al-Ghazālī discusses seven themes relating to the nature of man, God, the universe, life and death. The author calls these themes "ascensions," because they constitute the knowledge by means of which the hierarchy of faith may be upwardly traversed, and its higher ranges reached.

The First Ascension presents a description of the human being as a microcosm, a smaller universe containing a facsimile of the wider one around us. The author begins with the human body and

recounts the stages of its creation and its anatomy. He invites the reader to observe how man's constituent parts resemble those of the wider world, both physically and temperamentally, and to see in all this signs of the handiwork of the All-Knowing Creator. Al-Ghazālī makes this the First Ascension because it is the starting-point of reasoned faith. Next, he describes what lies above this level.

The Second Ascension concerns the nature of the soul and the question of its immortality, which is "the foundation of all knowledge." The author divides this discussion into three parts: the first on the faculties of the soul, the second on the soul's incorporeality, and the third on its immortality.

In the Third Ascension, al-Ghazālī addresses some cosmological questions concerning the nature of the cosmos and how God acts through it, and the nature of the divine knowledge and will. Here he revisits ground covered more extensively in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), his polemic against certain excesses in philosophy, particularly the claims that the universe is eternal, and that God's knowledge does not cover particulars. He also examines the phenomenon of motion and describes God as the First Mover, and how human motion is characterized by a tension between the material realm of the body and the angelic realm of the spirit. Al-Ghazālī refers to this same tension in his work on ethics, *The Criterion of Action* (*Mizān al-'amal*), affirming that the dichotomy between virtue and vice is the result of the tension between these higher and lower planes.

The Fourth Ascension comprises a discussion and commentary on the Verse of Light (Qur'ān 24:35), which was the subject of the author's treatise *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*). Here he revisits the subject and provides another commentary which is distinct from that of the *Niche* as well as complementary to it. Al-Ghazālī's different approach here brings out the symbolic richness of the Qur'ānic text.

The Fifth Ascension concerns the meaning of Prophethood and the attitudes towards it that prevail among mankind. The Sixth Ascension concerns the nature of the Resurrection and the Afterlife, and the question of the physical restoration of the body. Finally, the Seventh Ascension addresses the meaning of death, and how it is the culmination of life and a return home. Al-Ghazālī depicts life as a measured passage between extremes, like the gradual passing of one season into another. The soul is a temporary visitor to a strange land, and must do the best it can in the alien place where it finds itself. But it must not become overly attached to that place, lest it forget its true home altogether. Otherwise, the homeward journey will be a jolting and uncomfortable experience, instead of the joyous return that it ought to be.

The Rules of Interpretation (*Qānūn al-ta'wīl*)

In *Qānūn al-ta'wīl* al-Ghazālī addresses some questions regarding certain ambiguous concepts mentioned in the Islamic tradition, including the manner in which "Satan runs through each of you as blood runs," the nature of the jinn and angels, and the literal interpretation of certain texts describing the Hereafter. It is possible that the content of this treatise is drawn from the dialogue between al-Ghazālī and the Andalusian judge and scholar Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), who studied under al-Ghazālī for a short time in Baghdad and then continued to correspond with him after his return to the west.¹

Before addressing the specific points raised in the questions, al-Ghazālī expresses his dislike of discussing such subjects and then provides a general rule for approaching all such ambiguous

i See Frank Griffel, *al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 69–71.

concepts described in tradition. First, he explains that in their approaches to such matters, people are divided into five factions with respect to the extent to which they favor literalism, rationality, or some mixture of the two. As always, al-Ghazālī favors the middlemost position, comprising "those who seek to combine the study of reason and tradition and make a foundation of both of them." However, he warns, this is exceedingly difficult to achieve because there will inevitably come a point where reason fails to offer a convincing interpretation for a given text. In such instances, according to al-Ghazālī, there are three things that one must do: (i) be humble and recognize that one cannot realistically aspire to know everything; (ii) not give up hope in reason itself simply because a given mystery seems unsolvable; and (iii) refrain from claiming to give a definitive interpretation in situations where there is no valid reason for preferring one possible explanation over another. To do otherwise would constitute "presuming to know God's intent based on guesswork alone."

Having laid this foundation, al-Ghazālī then turns to some of the questions posed by his interlocutor, applying the above principles. He explains the difference between satanic temptation and angelic inspiration; and he shows how the rational conception of these things can tell us something of their nature, while Revelation provides us with their names and adds further details that reason could not discover unaided. The author then turns to other related questions about the nature of the jinn and the angels and their relationship with man, and the manner in which phenomena of the supra-material realm may interact with beings in the material world. Other questions he refuses to touch at all, since to do so would violate his own rule against refraining from guesswork. Al-Ghazālī urges the reader to remember always that no matter how powerful reason may appear to be, it can never be relied upon to function correctly without the illuminating guidance of Revelation.

Protection of the Masses From Theology (*Iljām al-‘awāmm*)

The colophon in the manuscript of this treatise, MS. Şehid Ali Paşa 1712, Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, dated 15 Sha‘bān 507 (25 January 1114), states that this was the last of al-Ghazālī’s works and that he finished it in the first days of Jumādā al-Ākhira 505 (December 1111), just a few days before his death. That he worked on the treatise through his final illness is a mark of how important the subject matter was to the author. In it, he gives his final word on the role and standing of theology in Islamic society and his recommendations on how creed ought to be presented to the masses. In his previous writings, al-Ghazālī had already expressed his frustrations with many aspects of the Muslim academia of his time, particularly regarding the focus on form over substance and the undue attention given to abstruse points of doctrine that provided little benefit and posed much harm due to the confusions to which it could give rise. In this treatise the author sums up these frustrations and attempts to present the reader with an approach to creed that is divested of these excesses and more true to the approach of the first Muslims, the *Salaf*, while cautioning against the error of rigid literalism caused by an inadequate comprehension of the language of Revelation and the context in which it was revealed.

In the first of the treatise’s three chapters, al-Ghazālī outlines the creed of the early Muslims and how they understood the texts of Revelation that when taken absolutely literally—and out of context—seem to imply anthropomorphic notions regarding the divine. He insists that any reading of the text must be carried out while observing seven key duties: affirmation of divine transcendence, acceptance, acknowledgment of one’s own incapacity, silence, discipline, self-restraint in private and in public, and deference to the people of knowledge. He then explains each of these duties in turn, providing examples of how they apply to the texts

in question. The author affirms that belief does not necessarily require absolute understanding, and that faith is not compromised, but rather strengthened, by admitting that although one may not understand exactly what a given passage of Revelation means, one has faith in it all the same. After all, even the Prophet ﷺ himself said, "I cannot praise You sufficiently; You are as You have praised Yourself." Al-Ghazālī urges us to know our proper place and not to rush into delving into things that are beyond us; and he cautions preachers against discussing such matters in public. It is also crucially important to preserve the integrity of the text and not attempt to reword it or meddle with it in any way, since any meaning that arises from a text that has been interfered with may well be entirely foreign to the text itself.

Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that sometimes ideas regarding a text may arise in the mind such that one may be incapable of resisting them and find it necessary to discuss them with someone else or at the very least contemplate them internally. But when such occasions arise, he tells us, we must always remember our own fallibility and never become confident that our suspicions about the meaning of a text are definitely correct. Provided that one recognizes that his personal opinion is no more than that, it will be "a truthful expression of what is in his soul and his conscience, [not] a judgment about the Attributes of God Most High or the meaning of His Word." The author is asserting that the opinions a person holds about God may say more about that person's soul than they do about God, which explains why the errors that Islamic theology originally rose to combat did not originate until sometime after the incipience of Islam, since "the age of the early Muslims was an age of tranquil hearts."

In Chapter 2, al-Ghazālī aims to prove that the approach of the early Muslims to such ambiguous texts was the correct one: by argument from reason as well as from tradition. The author argues

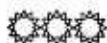
that since the Prophet ﷺ knew better than anyone what ensures salvation for mankind, and as he conveyed this to his Companions they must have been in a better position than anyone to understand what he taught. They did not engage in speculative theology in the manner that the later proponents of the *Kalām* tradition did, and this can only be because that is not the best approach to the subject. Otherwise, they would have founded the science of theology themselves and discussed it at length, as they did with the laws of estate division and other subjects. He then cites well-known traditional texts wherein the Prophet ﷺ urges all Muslims to follow the example of his Companions. He acknowledges that some innovations can be good as long as they are beneficial and do not contradict the fundamentals of the faith, but argues that it is by no means proven that theological enquiry is an instance of such a worthy innovation.

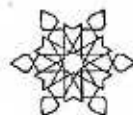
In Chapter 3, the author addresses some pertinent questions relating to what has gone before—not least the question of why, if they pose such dangers when taken absolutely literally, such expressions exist in Revelation at all. Al-Ghazālī's answer is that this is simply a necessity of language, and that as long as fundamental truths are established by context, no ambiguity of expression can pose them any harm. It is when this context is lacking that confusion may arise, which is why it ought to be the role of Muslim educators to provide that context. If the Qur'ān had addressed the Arabs using the sterile language of speculative theology rather than the dynamic and expressive language which they spoke, it would have left them cold instead of capturing their hearts with its majesty. As al-Ghazālī says, "There is no good to be found in an expression of transcendence that is so direct and forceful that it causes almost everyone to stray into [denying the divine altogether]."

The author then addresses some of the more common questions that are asked in this context, such as the uncreated nature of the

Qur'ān. This is done by reference to the four levels of existence, "existence among entities, existence in the mind, existence in language, and existence as written upon the page," and by citing as an example fire and how it exists in each of these four modes. This is something that everyone understands innately, although it may never occur to them to think of things in this way. Al-Ghazālī insists that the early Muslims were well aware of such distinctions, even if they never formalized them into a science as the theologians did: "They may not have taken pains to develop the terminology to express them, but they were aware of them, and aware that ordinary people cannot handle them, which is why they were silent about them and encouraged the masses to do likewise. That was exactly the right course of action."

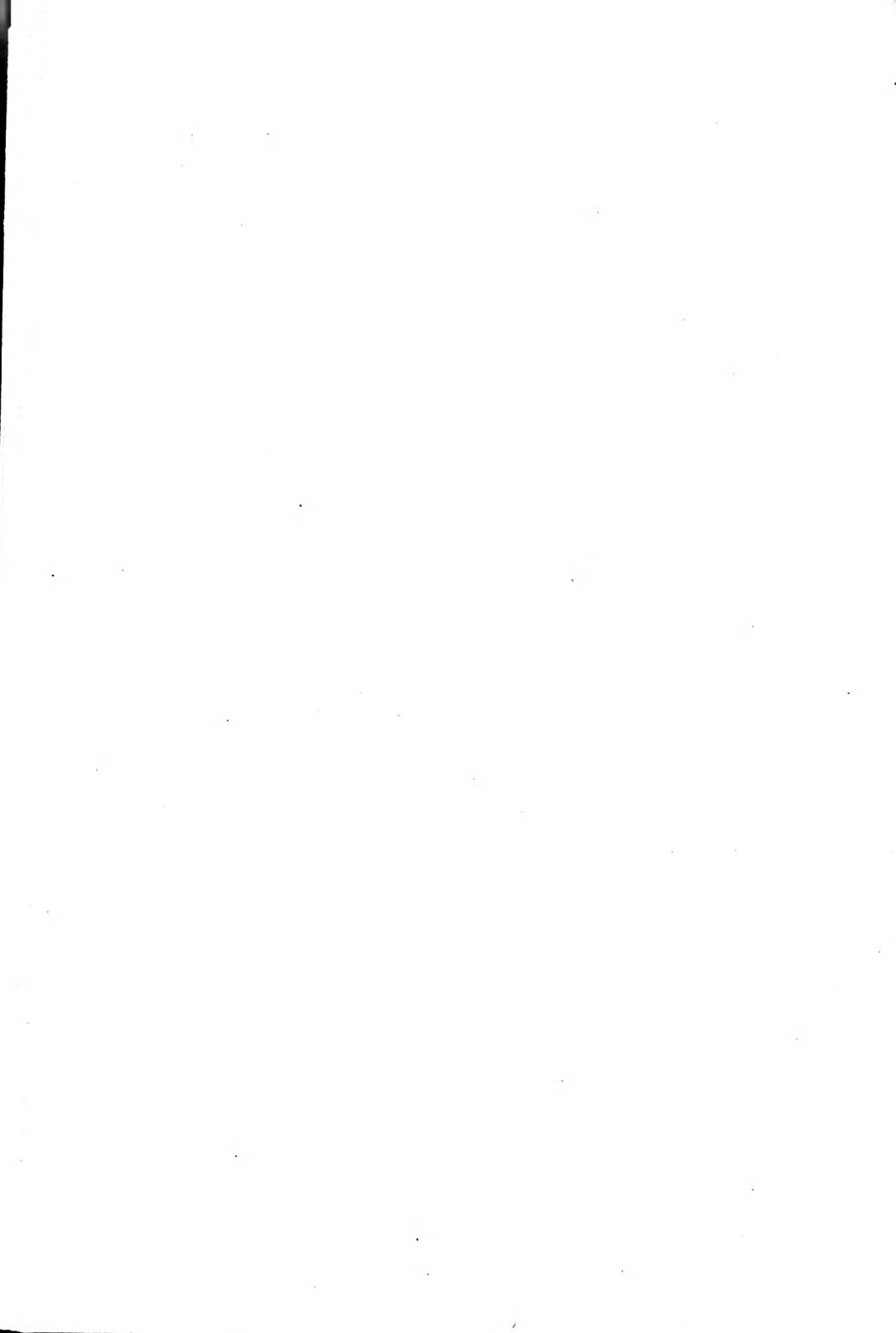
Al-Ghazālī concludes the treatise, and therewith his entire written corpus, by examining the different levels of faith, ranging from the unshakeable conviction that is experienced only by a very few to the self-indulgent belief that amounts to no more than wishful thinking. Some believe things because they were raised from childhood to do so; others because they found themselves living among people who believed them; others because they were convinced by rational arguments; and others because they witnessed something that instilled faith into their hearts from out of nowhere like a brilliant bolt of lightning. But what matters is not the source of that faith, but the faith itself. "When the image of truth is engraved upon the heart, it does not matter how it got there. Whether it was by true proof, formal proof, convincing proof, acceptance based on a high opinion of someone, or no more than blind conformity, does not matter. What matters is that the belief is true."





GOD-GIVEN KNOWLEDGE

al-Risāla al-laduniyya





*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Praise be to God, who adorns the hearts of His servants with the light of sanctity, and nourishes their spirits with beauty and goodness. With the key of understanding He opens the door to realization of His unity for those who attain outward and inward knowledge. I invoke peace and blessings upon our master Muḥammad, the Master of Messengers, who was tasked with calling and shepherding his Community to guidance; and upon his family, dwellers in the sanctuary of [Divine] protection.

One of my friends has told me that a certain religious scholar denies the existence of the unseen God-given knowledge (*'ilm ghaybī ladunī*)ⁱ upon which the Sufi masters base their teachings. The Sufis, for their part, maintain that this knowledge is stronger and sounder than any sciences that can be attained through

i The term *'ilm ladunī*, literally "presence-knowledge," comes from the Qur'ānic account of Moses and Khidr: *Then they found one of Our servants whom We had given mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence* (Qur'ān 18:65). In Islamic spiritual tradition, the phrase "from Our Presence" (*min ladun-nā*) gave rise to the adjective *ladunī*, meaning knowledge received directly from God through divine inspiration, as the author describes in Chapter 5.

ordinary instruction. Apparently, this skeptical cleric claims that "I cannot conceive of this knowledge of the Sufis, nor do I believe that anyone in the world could speak of true knowledge from thought and contemplation without acquiring knowledge in a normal manner."

I replied that it seems that this scholar is not familiar with the ways in which such knowledge is gained. He must not know much about the human soul and its attributes, and how it is able to receive traces of the Unseen and knowledge from the Supersensory Realm.

My friend allowed that that was true, for this scholar asserts that knowledge is limited to jurisprudence, Qur'ānic exegesis, and theology, and that there is no other kind of knowledge beyond these. Furthermore, he claims, the only way to learn these sciences is by formal study and the acquisition of expertise.

"Indeed," I replied. "Yet how is one to learn Qur'ānic exegesis? The Qur'ān, after all, is an ocean that encompasses all things. These books which everybody knows of cannot possibly contain all its meanings and secrets. In fact, exegesis is something entirely different from what this fellow 'knows' it to be."

My friend added, "He does not respect any works of exegesis except for the famous ones attributed to the likes of Qushayrī, Tha'labī, Māwardī, and so on."

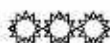
I replied, "Then he must have strayed far from the right path, for al-Sulamī's commentaryⁱ contains many pearls of wisdom from the masters of truth that are not found in other books. So, this man believes that knowledge is limited to jurisprudence, theology, and those popular works of exegesis. He must be unaware of certain facts about the sciences: their details, levels, true natures, and outward and inward aspects. It is always the case that when

i *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, the early Sufi commentary on the Qur'ān by Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).

people are ignorant of something, they deny its existence. This man clearly has not experienced a taste of Reality. Why would he admit the existence of God-given knowledge, when he has not seen it for himself? Yet I would not wish him to acknowledge it as long as he does not know it firsthand, for that would be nothing but blind conformity or conjecture."

My friend said, "Would you be willing to write something about the levels of knowledge and the truth about this science, as though you were justifying its existence to yourself?"

I replied, "That would be extremely difficult. But I could write an introduction to the subject and set down a few words about it, if time allows and the right words come to mind. I will not speak about it at length, for 'the best speech is short and to the point.' I ask God, Glorious and Majestic is He, for His grace and assistance." This book is the response to my honorable friend's request.





CHAPTER I

THE NOBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge may be defined as the tranquil rational soul's envisaging of the natures and forms of things, detached from matter: what they are, how they are, their quantity, their substance, and their individual essences, if they have them. The knower is the subject of knowledge, the one who encompasses, perceives, and envisages. Its object is the known, the thing that is engraved upon the knower's soul. The nobility of any knowledge is determined by the nobility of its object, and the level of the knower depends on the level of the knowledge.

Without doubt, the highest and most important object of knowledge is God, the Maker, the Originator, the Real, the One. Knowledge of Him is knowledge of *tawhīd*, divine unity, which of all types of knowledge is the best, the most important, and the most perfect. This knowledge is essential and must be acquired by all intelligent beings. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah 224). He ﷺ told us to travel in pursuit of this knowledge, saying, "Seek knowledge, even if it be in China."¹ It is the best kind of knowledge, which is why God singled out those who possess it for mention among the most sublime company, saying: *God bears witness that there is no god*

but He, as do the angels and the people of knowledge (Qur'ān 3:18). Those who are truly learned in the science of divine Unity are first and foremost the Prophets and then the learned, who are their heirs.

Yet although this science is noble and perfect in itself, it does not obviate the need for the other sciences. On the contrary, attaining it requires much groundwork that cannot be achieved without engaging in various branches of knowledge, including such things as the study of the heavenly bodies and all God's other works. Conversely, the science of divine unity itself yields many other sciences, as we shall discuss when the time comes.

Knowledge is inherently noble, regardless of its object. Even the science of sorcery is noble, though sorcery itself is falsehood. This is because knowledge is opposed to ignorance, and ignorance is caused by darkness. Darkness is from the realm of stillness, which is almost nonexistence itself. Falsehood and misguidance are also from this realm. Ignorance, then, is tantamount to nonexistence, while knowledge is tantamount to existence. Existence is superior to nonexistence; and guidance, truth, and light are all on the side of existence. If existence is higher than nonexistence, then knowledge must be nobler than ignorance. Ignorance is like blindness and darkness, while knowledge is like sight and light. *Nor are the blind and the seeing equal, nor darkness and light* (Qur'ān 35:19-20). God states this plainly in His Words, Say, "Are those who know equal to those who know not?" (Qur'ān 39:9). Knowledge, then, is superior to ignorance; furthermore, ignorance is a trait of the body, while knowledge is an attribute of the soul; and the soul is superior to the body.

Knowledge has many categories, which we will enumerate in a later chapter. Another chapter will be devoted to the many ways of seeking it. But first, now that you have recognized the merit of knowledge, you must become acquainted with the tablet upon

which knowledge is written and recorded: the soul. The body cannot be the center of knowledge, for bodies are finite. Nor is the body vast enough to contain all the many sciences; it can do no more than serve as a place for them to be engraved. Only the soul is capable of receiving all the sciences. It can do so without impediment, since it has enough room to accommodate them all, and to store them without ever growing tired or losing hold of them. We shall now give a brief explanation of the soul.





CHAPTER 2

THE HUMAN SOUL AND SPIRIT

God Most High created man from two distinct things. One is the body, which is dense, dark, subject to generation and corruption, compounded, composed of parts, earthy, and incomplete with having something else to complement it. The other is the soul, which is substantial, simple, illuminated, perceptive, active, and mobile, and which complements instruments and bodies to make them whole. God Most High composes the body from nutritive parts, and causes it to grow with particles of dust. He lays out its base, levels its pillars, designates its extremities, and manifests the substance of the soul from His Command, which is one, perfect, perfecting, and beneficent.

By the soul (*nafs*) I do not mean the faculty that seeks nourishment, nor the faculty that stirs appetite and irascibility, nor the faculty that resides in the heart, producing life and manifesting sense and motion from the heart to the rest of the body. That faculty is called the "animal spirit" (*rūḥ ḥayawānī*), and sense, motion, appetite, and irascibility are among its forces. The faculty that seeks nourishment and resides in the liver for that purpose is called "the natural spirit" (*rūḥ ṭabīʿī*), and its attributes include digestion and excretion. The faculties of imagination, procreation,

and growth, and the other natural faculties are all in the service of the body, whereas the body is in the service of the animal spirit, for they receive its direction and move at its instigation.

Rather, by "soul" I mean nothing other than that perfect simple substance which is concerned solely with contemplation, memory, thought, discernment, and consideration, and which receives all objects of knowledge and never tires of receiving images that are entirely abstract and divested of matter. This substance is the chief of the spirits, the commander of the faculties, and they all serve and obey it.

Each group have their own name for the rational soul, by which I mean this substance. The philosophers call it the "rational soul" (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*). The Qur'ān calls it the "soul at peace" (Qur'ān 89:27) and the "spirit of the [Divine] command."¹ The Sufis call it the "heart." The names differ, but the meaning is one and the same. For us, the heart, spirit, and soul at rest are all names for the rational soul. It is the living, acting, perceiving substance. When we speak of the spirit or the heart without further qualification, we are speaking of this substance. The Sufis call the animal spirit the "soul," and the Lawgiver also uses the word this way, further emphasizing this by use of the possessive pronoun: "Your worst enemy is your own soul, which is between your two sides."² Here the word means the faculties of appetite and anger that issue from the heart, which sits between the two sides of the body.

Once you know the distinctions of this terminology, know that those who have looked into this matter use different expressions to designate this precious substance, and have differing views concerning it. The theologians known for the science of argument deem that the soul is a body; they say that it is a subtle body, as

i They ask you about the Spirit. Say, "The Spirit is from the command of my Lord; and you have not been given knowledge, save for a little." (Qur'ān 17:85)

opposed to this dense body. In their view, the difference between the spirit and the body is solely a question of subtility and density. Others consider the spirit to be an accident, and some physicians also take this view. Some of them believe that blood is a spirit. All of them are content with the limits of what their imaginations can offer, and they have never looked for the third category.

The three categories are body (*jism*), accident (*'ard*), and simple substance (*jawhar fard*). The animal spirit is a subtle body like a lamp lit in the glass of the heart, by which I mean the conical form suspended within the chest. Life is the glow of that lamp, blood is its oil, sense and motion are its light, appetite is its heat, and irascibility is its smoke. The nourishment-seeking faculty in the liver is its servant, guard, and agent. This spirit is present in all animals. Man is a body, and his effects are accidents. This spirit cannot be guided to knowledge, nor can it know the path of the created being or the right of the Creator. It is but a captive servant which dies when the body dies. If there is too much blood, the lamp goes out due to excessive heat. If there is too little, it goes out due to excessive cold. When it goes out, the body dies. The Word of the Sublime Creator and the edicts of Revelation are not directed at this spirit, for dumb beasts and animals are not held accountable to Revelation or addressed by its laws. Man alone is; and this is due to another quality in him that he alone possesses, which is the rational soul and the spirit at peace. This spirit is not a body or an accident. It is from the Command of God Most High, as He says: *The Spirit is from the Command of my Lord* (Qur'ān 17:85); *O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing* (Qur'ān 89:27-28).

The Command of the Creator is neither a body nor an accident, but a divine force like the Primal Intellect, the Tablet, and the Pen. These are simple substances without any materiality; they are incorporeal gleams, objects of the intellect rather than of the senses.

The spirit and the heart, according to our terminology, are of the nature of those substances, and therefore they are not subject to corruption, erasure, annihilation, or death. They leave the body and then wait to return to it on the Day of Resurrection, as Revelation describes. It is established in the wisdom sciences, by undeniable proofs and clear arguments, that the rational spirit is not a body or an accident but an immutable, perpetual, incorruptible substance. We need not repeat those arguments and proofs here, because they are already affirmed and acknowledged. Anyone wishing to verify this may consult the books on that subject. Our way is not to produce arguments, but to rely on firsthand witnessing and the vision of faith.

God Most High attributes the spirit to His Command, and sometimes to Himself, such as when He says, *I breathed into him of My Spirit* (Qur'ān 15:29); *The Spirit is from the Command of my Lord* (Qur'ān 17:85); *We breathed into her of Our spirit* (Qur'ān 21:91); and God Most High is far exalted above attributing to Himself a body or an accident, because they are lowly, changeable, ephemeral, and corruptible. The Lawgiver ﷺ said, "Spirits are marshaled troops" (Bukhārī 3336); and also, "The spirits of the martyrs are in the breasts of green birds" (Tirmidhī 1641).² Accidents do not last after the substance is annihilated, because they cannot subsist of themselves. Bodies, for their part, are subject to dissolution just as they were subject to composition from matter and form before, as is affirmed in the Scriptures. In light of all of these Verses, Traditions, and intellectual arguments, we know that the spirit is a simple perfect substance, alive in its essence, whose presence determines the soundness or corruption of the body. The animal spirit and all the bodily faculties are numbered among its forces. This substance receives the forms of information and the meanings of existing things without having to engage with their actual entities or persons. The soul is capable of

knowing the meaning of humanity without seeing a human being, just as it knows of angels and devils without having to see them in person, since those are beyond the scope of most people's senses.

Some Sufis say that the heart has an eye as the body does, and that the physical eye sees outward things whereas the eye of the intellect sees inward realities. The Messenger of God ﷺ said, "Every person's heart has two eyes, with which he perceives the Unseen. When God Most High desires good for a person, He opens the eyes of his heart so that he may see what is invisible to his eyesight" (Abū Dāwūd 496).

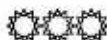
This spirit does not die when the body does, for God Most High summons it to His door, saying: *Return to your Lord* (Qur'ān 89:28). It only parts with the body, and with this parting the animal and natural faculties cease to operate, and what was in motion falls still. This stillness is called death. The people of the Path, by which I mean the Sufis, set more store by the spirit and the heart than by the person. Since the spirit is from the Command of God Most High, it must be like a foreigner in the body, always looking toward its source and place of return. Therefore, it receives graces more from the direction of the source than from the person, as long as it is strong enough to do so and is unsullied by the dross of nature.

Once you are aware that the spirit is a simple substance, that the body must have a place, and that accidents only subsist through substances, know also that this substance does not dwell in a locus or reside in a place. The body is not the site of the spirit or the locus of the heart; the body is the instrument of the spirit, the tool of the heart, the vehicle of the soul. The essence of the spirit is not connected to the parts of the body, nor is it detached from it. It is concerned with the body, communicates to it, and emanates upon it. Its light first manifests upon the brain, the brain being its particular locus of manifestation. The front part serves as its guardian,

the middle part as its minister and director, and the back as its treasury and treasurer. In every part, it has infantry and cavalry. The animal spirit is its servant, and the natural spirit its agent. The body is its vehicle, the world its domain. From life it obtains wares and possessions; from motion it obtains commerce; from knowledge it obtains profit. The Hereafter provides it with a goal and a purpose, Revelation with a path and a method. The evil-enjoining soul provides it with a guard and a general, the self-reproaching soul with an admonisher. The senses are its informants and aids. Religion is its shield, intelligence its teacher, sensation its pupil. And beyond all these, the Lord, Incomparable and Transcendent, *is ever on the watch* (Qur'ān 89:14).

In this way, and with these instruments, the soul does not advance towards the dense body or become directly attached to it, but rather provides it with benefit and a face turned toward its Creator, Who commands it to do so until an appointed time. Throughout this journey, the spirit engages in nothing but the pursuit of knowledge, for knowledge will be its recourse in the abode of the Hereafter: *Wealth and children are the adornment of the present life; [but the enduring things, the righteous deeds, are of greater merit with your Lord, and a better source of hope]* (Qur'ān 18:46). Just as the eye is occupied with viewing objects of vision, the ear is concerned with hearing sounds, the tongue has the aptitude for composing words, the animal spirit desires the pleasures afforded by irascibility, and the natural spirit loves the pleasures of food and drink—just so, the spirit at peace, by which I mean the heart, desires nothing but knowledge, and nothing else will satisfy it. It continues to learn for the duration of its life, and will adorn itself with knowledge all its days through until it parts with the body. If it ever accepts anything other than knowledge, it does so for the wellbeing of the body, not for its own sake or out of any essential interest in it.

Once you know about the states of the spirit, its immortality, and its desire for and preoccupation with knowledge, you must then become acquainted with the different types of knowledge, of which there are many. I shall now give a brief overview of them.





CHAPTER 3

THE TYPES AND CATEGORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

There are two categories of knowledge: religious (*shar'ī*), and intellectual (*'aqlī*). Most religious sciences are intellectual in the view of one who knows them, and most intellectual sciences are religious in the view of one who understands them. *And he to whom God grants no light has no light* (Qur'ān 24:40).

Religious Knowledge

The first category, religious knowledge, is divided into two types. The first is fundamentals (*uṣūl*, literally "roots"), meaning the science of divine Oneness (*tawḥīd*). This science concerns the Essence of God Most High and His eternal Attributes, active Attributes, and essential Attributes, as described by the well-known divine Names. It also concerns the nature of the Prophets, the Imams who succeed them, and their Companions, as well as the nature of life and death, the Resurrection and Reckoning, and the vision of God, Exalted is He. Those who engage in this science take as their primary source the verses of the Qur'ān from God Most High, then the reports from the Messenger ﷺ, then intellectual

proofs and analogical arguments. They adopted the premises and accouterments of analogy and argumentation from the philosophers, but used most of their terms in different ways. They speak of substance and accident, proof and speculation, demonstration and argument, although every term means something different for each group. Thus by "substance" the philosophers mean one thing, the Sufis another, the theologians another, and so on. But the purpose of this treatise is not to explain the meaning of these terms in their varying usages, so I will not digress into that now.

Those who specialize in these fundamentals and the science of divine Oneness are known as theologians (*mutakallimūn*), since theology (*kalām*) has become the name for that science. Another fundamental science is exegesis (*tafsīr*), because the Qur'ān is one of the most tremendous, eloquent, and precious of all things, and it contains many challenging passages that not just anyone can comprehend, but only those to whom God Most High grants knowledge of His Book. The Messenger of God ﷺ said, "Every verse of the Qur'ān has an outside and an inside; and the inside has its own inside, up to seven levels deep." Another narration has, "nine levels." He ﷺ also said, "Every letter of the Qur'ān has a boundary, and each boundary has a horizon."ⁱ In the Qur'ān, God Most High speaks of all types of knowledge and things in existence, the obvious and the hidden, the great and the small, the sensible and the intelligible, to which He alludes when He says, *There is not a grain in the shadows of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry, but that it is in a manifest Book* (Qur'ān 6:59). He says also, *A blessed Scripture We have sent down to you, so that they may contemplate its signs, and that people of pith may be mindful* (Qur'ān 38:29).

i "The Qur'ān has an outward and an inward, a boundary and a horizon." Tabarānī, *Kabīr* 8667.

Now since the subject of the Qur'ān is the greatest one of them all, what exegete could do it justice? What scholar could fulfil its due? Of course, each exegete undertakes to explain it as well as he can, and delves as deeply into elucidating it as the limits of his intelligence and the breadth of his knowledge will allow him to. They all said their piece, and spoke with the truth.ⁱ The science of the Qur'ān is a major source for the primary and secondary sciences, both religious and intellectual. The exegete must examine the Qur'ān from the aspects of language, symbolism, morphology, grammar and syntax, and Arab norms of speech, as well philosophical and mystical considerations, if his exegesis is to approach the truth. If he limits himself to only one of these aspects and relies on only one science to produce his commentary, he will not do justice to the text, and will find himself on the wrong side of the arguments of faith and reason.

Another fundamental science is that of traditional transmission. The Prophet ﷺ was the most eloquent of all men, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, and was a teacher who received Revelation from God Most High. His intellect encompassed all matters, higher and lower. Every statement he made, every word he spoke, comprises oceans of secrets and symbolic treasures. The science of transmission and the study of his hadiths is therefore of tremendous importance. No one can master the science of Prophetic teaching unless he refines his soul by following the Lawgiver, and removes the crookedness from his heart by adhering to the law of the Prophet ﷺ.

Anyone who wishes to discuss the exegesis of the Qur'ān, and the interpretation of Prophetic tradition must, if he is to avoid error, first master the Arabic language and its syntax, declension,

i This could alternatively be read as "yet in truth they said nothing at all," a rather less positive appraisal of the science.

and conjugation. The language is the ladder by which one ascends to all other sciences, and one cannot attain them without learning it. If you wish to reach the roof you must first set up the ladder, and only then can you ascend. The science of language is a crucial means and a vital ladder, and the seeker of knowledge cannot do without knowing it. Language, therefore, is the fundamental of all fundamentals. The first science of language is knowledge of the parts of speech, meaning the function of individual words, and then knowledge of the formation of verbs: the triliteral, quadrilateral, and so on. The linguist must study the poetry of the Arabs, foremost among which is the poetry of the pre-Islamic Age of Ignorance, for it disciplines the mind and refreshes the soul. In addition to poetry and the parts of speech, he must master the science of syntax, which in the science of language stands in the position of the balance for gold and silver, logic for philosophy, meter for poetry, the yardstick for fabric, or the dry measure for grain. If something is not weighed in the right balance, it is not possible to identify its excesses or deficiencies.

The science of language, therefore, is a means to the sciences of exegesis and transmission, which are means to the science of divine Oneness, which is the only means to salvation in the Hereafter. There we have an overview of the fundamental sciences.

The second type of religious knowledge is the science of ancillaries (*furū'*, literally "branches"). The nature of this distinction is that knowledge is either theoretical or practical. The fundamentals are theoretical, while the ancillaries are practical. This practical knowledge comprises three rights.

The first is the right of God Most High, which comprises the pillars of worship such as purity, ritual prayer, zakat, pilgrimage, jihad, invocation, feast days, Friday, and the associated voluntary and obligatory acts of worship.

The second is the right of one's fellow man, comprising the laws of social interaction, which has two aspects. The first is transactions: trade, partnership, gifts, loans, debt, retribution, and all types of indemnity. The second aspect is contracts: marriage, divorce, manumission, slavery, inheritance, and related issues.

The name "jurisprudence" (*fiqh*) is used to refer to these two rights. The science of jurisprudence is noble, beneficial, universal, and essential; humanity cannot do without it because of its universal necessity.

The third right is the right of the soul, which means the science of ethics. Some character traits are blameworthy and must be rejected and renounced; others are praiseworthy and must be adopted so that the soul is adorned with them. These blameworthy and praiseworthy traits are well-known, being described in the Book of God and the Traditions of the Messenger ﷺ; anyone who succeeds in fully acquiring any of the praiseworthy ones will enter Paradise.

Intellectual Knowledge

The second category of knowledge is intellectual knowledge, which is complex and challenging and is subject to right and wrong judgments. It comprises three levels. The first level, which is the beginning, is mathematics and logic. Mathematics includes arithmetic, which concerns numbers; geometry, which concerns dimensions and shapes; and astronomy, which means the science of the heavenly bodies, stars, regions of the earth, and related matters. Its branches include the sciences of astrology, birth dating, and the zodiacs. The art of music, which concerns intervals of pitch, is also a branch of mathematics.

Logic is concerned with defining and working with things that can be conceived of. It examines the objects of knowledge that are susceptible of verification, and subjects them to analogy and proof.

The science of logic revolves around this basis, beginning with simple terms, then compounds, then propositions, then analogy, then the categories of analogy, then the search for proof, which is the end of the science of logic.

The second level of intellectual knowledge, which is the middle, is natural science, whose proponent examines the "absolute body" (*al-jism al-mutlaq*);ⁱ the constituents of the world, substances and accidents, motion and stillness, the conditions of the heavens, and active and reactive things. This science gives rise to the examination of the conditions of the levels of being, the categories of souls, the humors, and the number of the senses and how they apprehend their objects. It then leads to the examination of the science of medicine, which is the science of bodies, ailments, medicines, treatments, and related matters. Its branches include meteorology, mineralogy, and the study of the properties of things. It extends to alchemy, which is the treatment of the ailing bodies within minerals.

The third level, which is the highest, is the study of existing things, then their division into the necessary and the possible, then contemplation on the Creator and His Essence, all His Attributes and Acts, His command, His wisdom, His decree, and how the manifestation of all beings in existence is ordained by Him. Furthermore, it comprises the study of higher beings, simple substances, incorporeal intellects, and perfect souls, followed by the study of the nature of angels and devils. It extends to the science of aspects of Prophethood, and the consideration of miracles and saintly gifts, the nature of sanctified souls, the states of sleep and wakefulness, and the stations of dreaming. Its branches include the sciences of talismans, incantations, and related matters.

i The *prima materia*, or the physical universe in general.

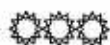
Each of these sciences has its own details, issues, and levels, to expound which would require lengthy explanation and commentary. But here it is better to be brief.

Sufi Knowledge

Intellectual knowledge is simple in itself, but gives rise to a complex science that pervades both categories of simple knowledge. This complex science is the science of the Sufis and the path of their mysticism. They have a science of their own, with a clear methodology, which combines both categories of knowledge. Their science includes the examination of mystical state and time, audition, ecstasy and yearning, drunkenness and sobriety, affirmation and effacement, poverty and annihilation,ⁱ sainthood and aspiration, master and disciple, and other aspects of their states, special features, attributes, and stations.

I may address these three types of knowledge in a separate book, if God Most High wills. The purpose of this treatise is only to list the types of knowledge, and therefore I have provided a brief overview and summary of them. Those who desire more may find it by consulting the relevant books on the subject.

Now that the overview of the types of knowledge is concluded, you must know for certain that each of these arts and sciences has its own specific requirements in order for it to be engraved in the souls of those who study it. After enumerating the sciences, you must know the methods of acquisition; each science has its own specific method, as I shall explain.



i "Annihilation" (فناء) here may be a mistranscription of "freedom from need" or "enrichment" (غنى), which would more usually be paired with "poverty."



CHAPTER 4

THE METHODS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

Human knowledge may be acquired in two ways. One is human instruction; the other is divine instruction. The first is familiar and universally experienced, and all intelligent people agree upon it.

Human Instruction

Human instruction has two aspects. The first, which comes from outside, is learning through instruction. The second, which comes from within, is engaging in contemplation. Contemplation from within is equal in rank to instruction from outside, inasmuch as instruction means for a person to benefit from an individual, while contemplation means for a soul to benefit from the Universal Soul. The Universal Soul is a more impactful influence, a more powerful teacher, than any scholar or intellectual.

Knowledge is planted in the soul in potentiality, like a seed in the earth, a pearl in the depths of the sea, or a precious mineral in the heart of a mine. Learning is the attempt to extract that thing from potentiality into actuality, and instruction is the process of extracting it. The soul of the learner therefore resembles that of the teacher, and shares a close relationship with it. The teacher is

like the farmer, the student like the earth, the potential knowledge like the seed, and the actual knowledge like the plant. When the learner's soul becomes complete it is like a fruit-bearing tree, or a pearl extracted from the sea. As long as the bodily faculties dominate the soul, the learner still has more to learn and more time to go, and he must endure hardship and toil in the pursuit of benefit. Once the light of the intellect predominates over his sensory attributes, a short moment of contemplation may suffice the learner in place of much study. A receptive soul can achieve more with an hour of contemplation than an unreceptive soul can with a year of study.

Some people, then, acquire knowledge by learning, others by contemplation. But learning requires contemplation too, for one cannot learn all particulars and universals, nor all objects of knowledge; one must learn something, then utilize contemplation to extract other things from it. Most speculative sciences and practical arts were produced by the souls of sages through clarity of mind, power of thought, and keenness of intuition, without a great deal of study or acquisition. If man did not have the capacity to produce knowledge from within by contemplating what he already knows, mankind would be forever waiting, and the darkness of ignorance would never be banished from their hearts. The soul cannot learn everything it needs to know, particulars and universals, by means of study alone; it must acquire some by study, some by observation—as is the way of people in general—and some by extracting them from his consciousness through clarity of thought.

Such has always been the way of the learned, and the principles of the sciences are based upon it. A student of geometry does not study everything that he will ever need to know, but rather studies the universal principles and axioms of his subject and then employs inference and analogy. A physician cannot learn all the particulars of every ailment and treatment in existence, but must

contemplate the universals that he knows and treat each person according to their constitution. An astrologer, too, studies the universal properties of the stars, and then contemplates and appraises different matters as they arise. The same is true of jurists, men of letters, and all other arts and crafts. One man invented an instrument such as the lute through his own thought process; and then another person invented another instrument based on that one. The same applies to all the arts, both physical and psychological: their principles are acquired by study, and the rest is extrapolated by contemplation. When the door of contemplation opens to the soul, it comes to know how to contemplate and how to return intuitively to the goal. The heart expands and the inner eye opens, and what the soul harbored in potentiality comes into actuality without the need for much study or prolonged effort.

Divine Instruction

The second way of acquiring knowledge is divine instruction, which also has two aspects. The first is Revelation (*wahy*). When the soul's essence is perfected, the pollutant of human nature and the dross of desire and expectation fall away from it, its regard becomes detached from the appetites of the world, and its connection to ephemeral hopes is severed. It turns itself entirely towards its Creator and Maker, holds fast to the liberality of its Originator, and places its reliance upon His grace and the emanation of His light. God Most High, in His grace, turns entirely towards that soul and looks upon it with a divine regard. He uses it as a tablet, and the Universal Soul as a pen, and He inscribes all His forms of knowledge upon it. The Universal Intellect becomes the teacher, the sanctified soul the student. All knowledge is attained for that soul and all images are engraved upon it, without any instruction or contemplation.

Confirmation of this is found in the Words of God Most High to His Prophet ﷺ, *He taught you what you knew not* (Qur'ān 2:239). The knowledge of the Prophets is of a higher order than the knowledge of all other creatures, being acquired directly from God Most High without mediation. An exposition of this is to be found in the story of Adam ﷺ and the angels. The angels had been learning all their lives and acquired a great deal of knowledge by many methods, becoming the most learned of all creatures and the most knowledgeable beings in existence. Adam, for his part, was not learned at all, for he neither studied nor had any teacher. The angels prided themselves above him, acting haughtily, and boasted, *"We glorify You with praise and sanctify You"* (Qur'ān 2:30), and we know the true nature of all things." So, Adam returned to the door of his Creator and detached his heart from all created things, turning to the Lord for help. *And He taught Adam the names, all of them, and then presented them to the angels and said, 'Now tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful'* (Qur'ān 2:31). Suddenly they were lowly before Adam, and their knowledge was diminished; the ship of their pride was wrecked, and they plunged into the sea of incapacity. *They said, 'Glory be to You! We know nothing but what You have taught us. Truly You are the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.'* He said, *'Adam, tell them their names'* (Qur'ān 2:32-33). Adam ﷺ then informed them of the hidden aspects of knowledge and the mysteries of the divine Command.

All intelligent people will therefore acknowledge that unseen knowledge born of Revelation is more powerful and perfect than acquired knowledge. The science of Revelation became the inheritance of the Prophets and the right of the Messengers. After the time of our master Muḥammad ﷺ, God closed the door of Revelation, and so the Messenger of God ﷺ was the Seal of Prophets. He was the most learned of mankind, the most eloquent of the Arabs and non-Arabs. He used to say, "My Lord taught me conduct, and

taught me well." He also said to his people, "Of all of you, I know and fear God Most High the most" (Aḥmad 24912). The reason his knowledge was nobler, stronger, and more perfect was that he acquired it by divine instruction, and never engaged in study or human instruction. God Most High says, *One of awesome power taught him* (Qur'ān 53:5).

The second aspect of divine instruction is inspiration (*ilhām*), which means that the Universal Soul communicates to the individual human soul in the measure of its purity, its receptivity, and the degree of its preparedness. Inspiration is the remnant of Revelation; Revelation is a direct communication of the Unseen, whereas inspiration is an allusion to it. Knowledge attained through Revelation is called Prophetic knowledge, while that attained through inspiration is called God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*). God-given knowledge means that which is acquired without any intermediary between the soul and the Creator. It is like illumination from the lamp of the Unseen falling upon a heart that is pure, undisturbed, and transparent. All knowledge is attained and known in the substance of the Primal Universal Soul, which, among the pure primal incorporeal substances, is to the Primal Intellect what Eve was to Adam ﷺ. It is clear that the Universal Intellect is nobler, stronger, more perfect, and nearer to God Most High than the Universal Soul, and that the Universal Soul is dearer, subtler, and nobler than the rest of creation. It is from the emanation of the Universal Intellect that Revelation proceeds, and from the radiance of the Universal Soul that inspiration comes. Revelation is the adornment of the Prophets, inspiration the ornament of the saints. When it comes to the knowledge of Revelation, just as the soul is below the intellect and the saint is below the Prophet, so too inspiration is below Revelation. It is weak compared to Revelation, but strong compared to dreams.

Both Prophets and saints, then, possess knowledge. Revealed knowledge, however, is for the Messengers alone and depends upon them, like the knowledge of Adam and Moses, upon them be peace, or Abraham and Muḥammad, may God bless them and grant them peace, and the other Messengers. The difference between a Messenger and a Prophet is that Prophethood is the sanctified soul's reception of true objects of knowledge and intellect from the substance of the Primal Intellect, while Messengerhood is the conveyance of these objects to those who can benefit from them and are able to receive them. It may be that a particular soul would be receptive to them but that they are not conveyed to it because of some impediment or for some other reason.

God-given knowledge is for the Prophets and the saints, as it was with al-Khiḍr ؑ, of whom God Most High says, *We taught him knowledge from Our Presence* (Qur'ān 18:65). The Commander of the Faithful 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, may God ennoble his countenance, said, "I placed my tongue in my mouth, and a thousand doors opened in my heart, with a thousand doors of knowledge in each door." He also said, "If a cushion were set down for me to sit upon, I could rule by the Torah for the followers of the Torah, by the Evangel for the followers of the Evangel, and by the Qur'ān for the followers of the Qur'ān." This level is not something that can be reached by means of human instruction alone; only the power of God-given knowledge can adorn a person with it. He ؑ also said that the commentaries on the Testament of Moses ؑ would amount to forty loads; and that if God permitted him to elucidate the meanings of the Fātiḥa, he would produce a similar quantity. Such an ample and expansive degree of knowledge can only be God-given, divine, and heavenly.

When God Most High desires good for a servant of His, He lifts the veils between Himself and the soul, which is the tablet, so that some of His hidden knowledge is manifested thereupon, and

the meanings of that knowledge are engraved upon it so that the soul may express them as it pleases. He grants this to whomever of His servants He will. The true meaning of wisdom is attained from God-given knowledge; and until a person has reached that level, he is not counted among the wise. Wisdom is a gift from God Most High: *He gives wisdom to whomever He will; and he who is given wisdom has been given much good. Yet none remember but people of pith.* (Qur'ān 2:269). That is because those who reach the level of God-given knowledge are freed from the need for much study and arduous learning. They study little and learn much; they endure light labor and enjoy long rest.

When Revelation ceased and the door of Messengerhood was closed, mankind had no further need for Messengers to come to renew the call, since the proof had been made plain and the religion perfected. As God Most High says: *Today I have perfected for you your religion* (Qur'ān 5:3). Wisdom entails not having more of a good thing than is needed. But the door of inspiration will never be closed, and the replenishment of the Universal Soul will never be cut off, for souls will always be in need of affirmation, renewal, and reminder. Mankind have no further need for Messengerhood and the Prophetic call, but they do need to be reminded and awakened because of how engrossed in temptations and absorbed in appetites they are. Therefore, God Most High closed the door of Revelation, which provided the sign for His servants, and opened the door of inspiration as a mercy to them, thereby setting things in place and arranging their ranks, so that they might realize that God is Kind to His servants, and that He provides for whom He will beyond all reckoning.





CHAPTER 5

THE LEVELS OF SOULS IN THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge of various kinds is implanted in all human souls, which are all capable of receiving every kind of knowledge. The reason why a given soul fails to acquire its portion of knowledge is that something impedes it from the outside. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Mankind were created with pure faith, but then devils duped them" (Muslim 2865). He ﷺ also said, "Every newborn is born with primordial nature (*fiṭra*)," and so on.ⁱ The rational human soul is qualified for the Universal Soul to shine upon it, prepared to receive intelligible images from it, by the power of its original purity and primal translucency. However, some souls fall sick in this world and are kept from apprehending such truths by various ailments and obstacles. Others remain healthy as they originally were, without contracting sickness or corruption, so that they remain receptive for as long as they live. Healthy souls are Prophetic souls, able to receive Revelation and divine assistance, and to perform miracles and manifest spiritual power in the world

i The hadith continues: "...it is the parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian." Bukhārī 1358.

of creation and corruption. Such souls retain their primal health, and their constitution is not altered by the corruption of disease or the defects of accidents. The Prophets therefore became the physicians of souls, inviting mankind to be restored to the health of their primordial nature.

The ailing souls in this lower world reach various levels. Some of them suffer only mildly from the disease of their abode, so that their minds are clouded by forgetfulness, and they must engage in study and seek their primordial wellbeing. Their sickness can be cured with a minimum of treatment, the clouds of forgetfulness being swept away by the slightest reminder. Others study their entire lives through, striving to learn and acquire knowledge and to rectify themselves, and yet their constitutions are so degenerate that they never understand anything; when the constitution is degenerate, it is not susceptible of treatment. Others go on remembering and then forgetting, and they engage in spiritual discipline and self-abnegation, thereby discovering some small measure of light and limited illumination.

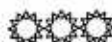
The reason for this disparity among souls is that they turn towards the world and become engrossed in it according to the measure of their spiritual strength or weakness, just as is true of a healthy person when he falls sick, or a sick person when he regains health. When this knot is untied, souls acknowledge the existence of God-given knowledge and realize that they possessed such knowledge originally in their primordial nature and purity, when they were first created. The reason they became ignorant was that they fell sick due to their association with this dense body, and their residence in this abode of turbidity, this place of darkness. By studying they do not seek to create knowledge that did not exist before, nor to bring intelligence into existence out of nothing, but to restore their original innate knowledge. The sickness arises from the soul's preoccupation with adorning the body and ensuring that its

foundations are firm. When a loving and compassionate father tends to his son, he thinks only of his son's needs and forgets everything else. In the same way, the soul, because of its love and compassion for the body, strives to make it thrive and take care of its needs and interests. It becomes immersed in the sea of nature because of its weakness and individuality. Therefore, it needs, throughout its life, to engage in study in order to be reminded of what it has forgotten, and to restore what it has lost. Learning is nothing other than the soul returning to its substance and bringing the contents of its conscience out into actuality, so that it may achieve perfection and attain salvation. If some souls are too weak to be guided to the true nature of their substance alone, they must hold fast to a compassionate and learned teacher and seek his help in achieving their aim. A sick person may not know how to treat himself, but he knows that being healthy is praiseworthy and desirable, and so he consults a learned and compassionate physician for treatment and a cure for his ailment.

We have sometimes seen a learned man fall sick with a particular ailment affecting the head or the breast, which so impairs his soul that he forgets all of his knowledge and becomes confused, and all of the learning he spent his life acquiring disappears from his mind. Then when he recovers and his health is restored, the forgetfulness leaves him, and his soul regains its knowledge and remembers what it had forgotten during his sickness. This shows us that the knowledge was not erased, but was only forgotten; and there is a great difference between erasure and forgetfulness. Erasure means the total obliteration of what was engraved or written, while forgetfulness means that the inscription is concealed. It is like the light of the sun being hidden from the eye by fog or clouds, not like sunset when the sun disappears altogether from above the ground to below it.

The soul's engagement in learning, then, is the removal of the sickness that blocks the substance of the soul, so that it returns to what it knew in its pristine primordial nature, when it was pure and new.

Once you understand the true purpose of learning and the nature and substance of the soul, you must also know that the ailing soul is in need of learning and must devote its life to acquiring knowledge. If the soul's sickness is slight and mild, its evil tenuous, its clouds thin, and its constitution fundamentally sound, then it does not require a great deal of learning or a protracted struggle. The slightest reflection and contemplation will suffice it, because it will return to its origin and primal nature, discover its secrets, and bring out what lies within it from potentiality into actuality. What was planted within it will become its outward adornment, and it will be completed and perfected. It will learn most things in a few short days, and find a good way to give expression to what it knows. It will become knowing, perfect, and articulate. It will seek light by turning toward the Universal Soul, and will cast that light upon the particular soul. Through the way of passionate love, it will emulate its archetype. It will sever the roots of envy and rancor, and turn away from the vanities and trifles of the world. When it reaches this level, it will truly have attained knowledge, salvation, and triumph. And that is the true objective of all of the human race.





CHAPTER 6

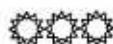
THE TRUE MEANING OF GOD-GIVEN KNOWLEDGE, AND HOW IT IS ACQUIRED

God-given knowledge is the influx of the light of inspiration that comes after the fashioning of the soul. As God Most High says: *By the soul and Him Who fashioned it, and inspired in it its iniquity and its reverence!* (Qur'ân 91:7-8). This return has three aspects. The first is the study of all types of knowledge and the acquisition of the greater part of most of them. The second is true spiritual discipline and earnest vigilance. The Prophet ﷺ alluded to this when he said, "Whoever acts upon what he knows, God bequeaths him knowledge of what he knows not."ⁱ He ﷺ also said, "Whoever devotes forty mornings purely to God, God Most High causes springs of wisdom to well up from his heart to his tongue."ⁱ The third is contemplation, for when the soul attains knowledge through learning and discipline and then contemplates what it has learned, meeting all the proper requirements of contemplation, the door to the Unseen opens for it, just as the doors of profit open for a merchant who utilizes his wealth in the proper way; but if he

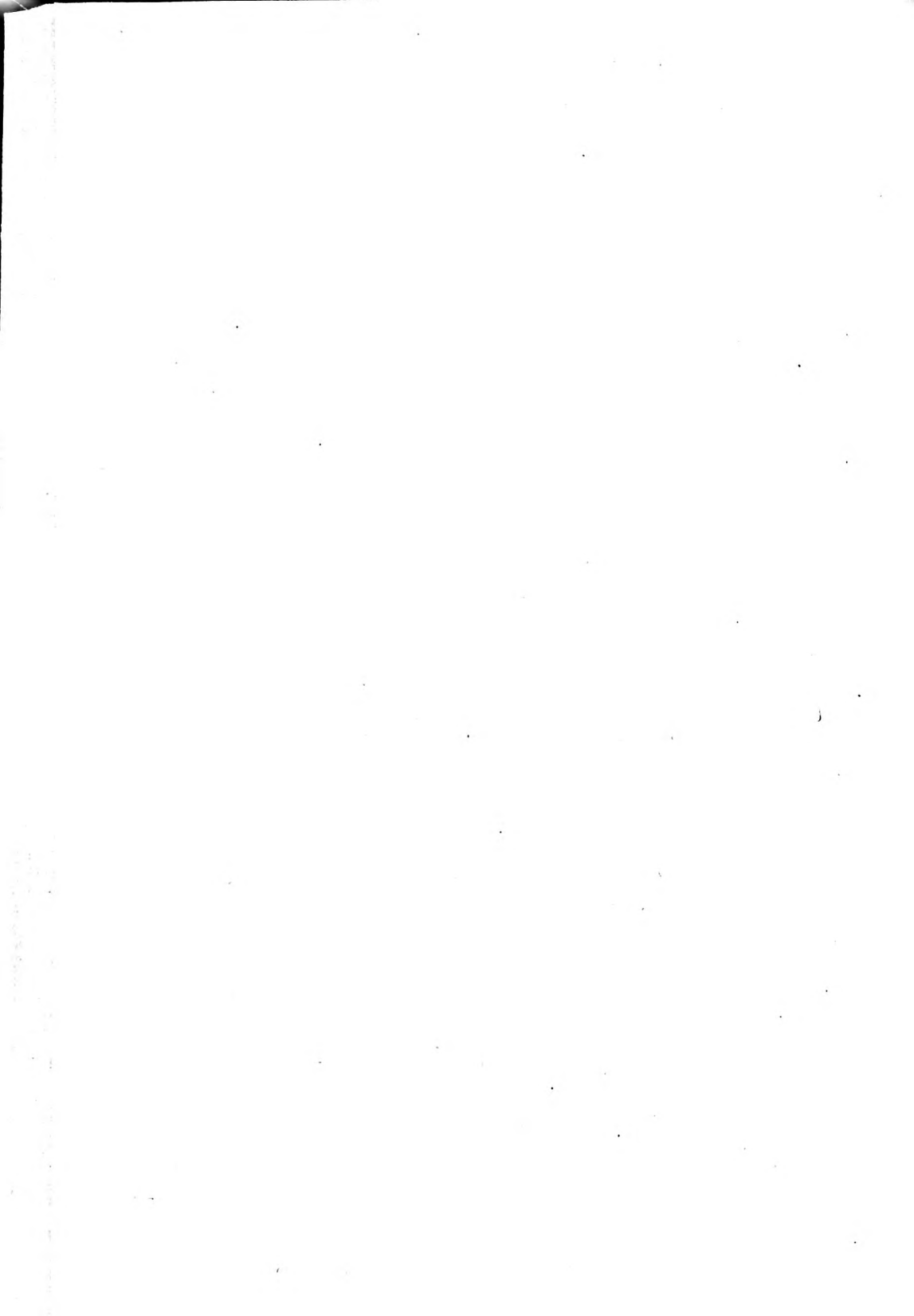
i 'Irāqī states in his study of the sources cited in the *Iḥyā'* that he could not find a source for this hadith, although there are others that express the same sentiment in different words.

uses it incorrectly he will be ruined. When contemplation is carried out correctly, wisdom is attained and a window into the realm of the Unseen opens in the heart. Anyone who achieves this becomes knowing, perfect, wise, inspired, and aided. The Prophet ﷺ said, "An hour of contemplation is better than sixty years of worship."ⁱ But I shall leave the requirements of contemplation for another treatise, as the method, nature, and true meaning of contemplation is an abstruse subject requiring much explanation—although it will be easy if God Most High makes it so.ⁱⁱ

Let us end this treatise here, since what has been said will be sufficient for those for whom it is meant; *and he to whom God grants no light, has no light* (Qur'ān 24:40). God is the Protector of the faithful, and we place reliance upon Him alone. May God bless our master Muḥammad and his Family and Companions, and grant them peace. God is our Sufficiency, and a most excellent Patron. There is no strength nor power but in God, the Sublime, the Magnificent. In Him I place my trust, now and forever. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.



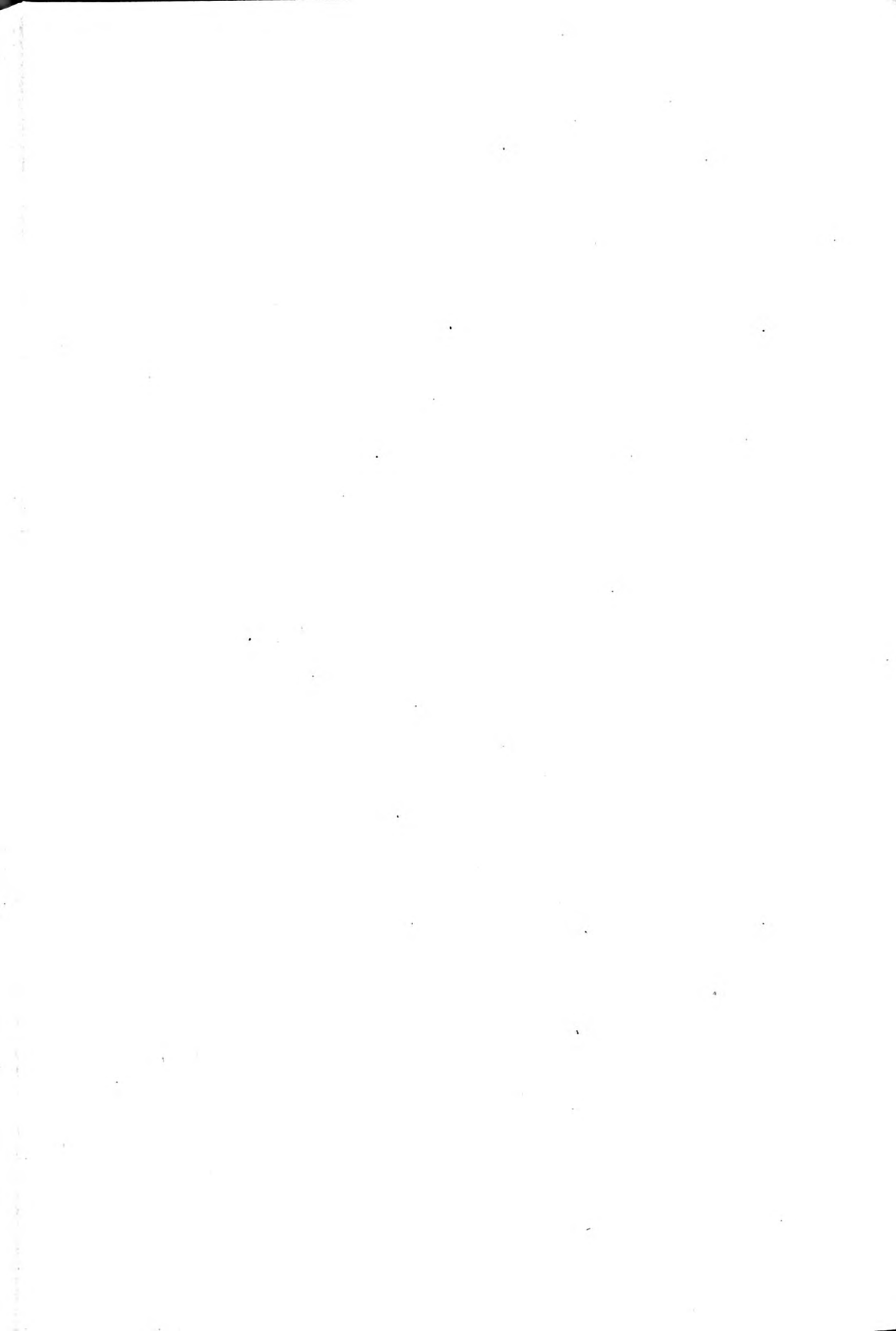
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- i 'Irāqī attributes this hadith to a narration of Ibn Ḥibbān in *Kitāb al-ʿazama*. Another possible translation is, "A moment of contemplation..."
 - ii Imam Ghazālī was in fact granted success in accomplishing this, in Book 29, *Kitāb al-Tafakkur* (The Book of Contemplation), of the *Iḥyāʾ*.





THE ASCENSIONS OF THE TRAVELERS

Ma'ārij al-sālikin





*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Dear God, we praise You and give thanks to You, though we believe that gratitude does not gratify You as it gratifies the needy; for when souls are granted aid, they ought to give thanks to their Benefactor. Glory be to You, Merciful Lord! You are Forbearing despite Your all-embracing knowledge, and tolerant despite Your tremendous power. You do not deny provision even to those who openly disobey You. How Sublime You are! You are the Near, the Manifest, the First, the Last. The insolence of Your servants does not disturb You, though You are nearer to them than their jugular veins.

We ask You, dear God, to send blessed, pure benedictions upon the Prophet of Mercy, the Savior of this Community, Your servant Muḥammad, who guides and shepherds mankind toward You.

Dear brothers, I offer you sincere advice; but do you like sincere advisers? I desire that you be guided; but can I do more than deliver the message? Advice does little good when sickness has become so widespread that even the physicians are sick, the wrong medicines are prescribed, and vision has been exchanged for blindness. Hearts have grown foul and become coated with rust, and inner

vision has become deficient through lack of use. The Signs of God have been taken in jest, and spiritual purposes have been turned into means of seeking ephemeral gains. There is no one to rouse the slumbering, no one to set errors right.

Sick, all good things lost, in an ocean of dross,
 They are drowning. No call can awaken the masses
 Addicted to every rancid, lowly vice,
 Their faces fixed on the face of the dirham,
 Too fast asleep to be roused to their purpose;
 Only the most dreadful alarm can wake them.

But we seek refuge with God lest we be among those who denigrate a path that they themselves are treading, or who say, "Mankind are ruined!" though they are ruined along with them.

Dear brother, the goal that you seek comes down to two key concerns. You desire no more than to achieve them, and your only wish is to achieve realization of them. Among all the sciences, your interest lies solely in the divine ones. You claim that your aim is to seek to be free of the evil of corrupt doctrines, and to flee from opinions that are opposed to the truth. That being so, I thought it best to draw attention to these two concerns in order to justify our recommendations and to address this as our chief concern.

(1) The first concern, dear brother, lies in the observable and ever-growing corruption of the present age, the profusion of opinion and corrupt beliefs, with no one to defend against them or criticize them. But for the political adroitness of kings, the darkness of these doctrines would have already enveloped the world and planted its foot firmly in every land: *that God might conclude a thing that was to be done* (Qur'ān 8:42), for He has promised to preserve a vestige of the truth upon the earth. Yet as time goes by and events unfold, many obstacles arise and spiritual aspirations

decline, which leads to corruption and sickness that increase every day, nourished by evil and sin. I therefore deemed it proper to offer these counsels, so that they may aid seekers and assist travelers, and provide enduring benefit for future generations.

The most crucial element of this purpose is to draw attention to the delusional and noxious ideas that have captured the minds of most people as they sink further into them. This has always been the cause for the decline of religious laws: as time passed, opposition to the teachings of the Prophets grew with souls becoming enchanted by every new and unfamiliar idea, every exotic notion. Ignorant people are prone to such delusions, and even the intelligent may be deceived by them if they are too slow to recognize them for what they are.

The many errors of these people are caused by two things. The first is failure to refute them. The second is that those who set out to refute them are invariably ignoramuses whose idea of refuting them is to reject everything they believe in, such as dismissing the four key sciences of geometry, arithmetic, logic, and astronomy, which are the key constituents of all their other sciences and which they have mastered to a greater degree than any others. The science of logic, for example, was refined through the ages until the time of Plato, who further systemized it and distinguished sophistry from true argument. His pupil Aristotle followed in his footsteps and further systemized the art of logical demonstration, and refined the eight books. They also derived astronomy and geometry from the *Sindhind*, another book that was the culmination of ages of learning. There is no reason whatsoever to condemn them for the universals of these sciences. Rather, they ought to be asked to correct particular issues and usages, and to rectify certain forms and premises regarding the divine sciences, which they have altogether neglected. That is where the problem lies. As for denying that the earth is spherical or that it sits amid the spheres, or the elevations

of the earth's regions and other precise geological matters, or the nature of eclipses—it is entirely meaningless to deny such things and to make this the focus of debates with them.

That, then, is the first concern, which will be elaborated further as we discuss the issues on which they differ throughout the book, God willing.

(2) The second concern is that the value of the truth cannot be known by itself until its opposite is known, for it is by reference to their opposites that things are differentiated. Our purpose is to draw attention to the safest way and the straightest path; but we must also discuss the crooked path, so that the reader may be aware of it. Be assured that we are not doing so for frivolous reasons, or departing from the way of our righteous predecessors, who would keep silent unless there was something important to say. Therefore, we must add this to the second concern, and request that the reader excuse us and give thanks to God for blessing him. We say, then, that those who profess the Testimony of Faith are divided into seven groups.

The first group are those who utter the two Testimonies of Faith without paying heed to their meaning or living religious lives. That is what Bedouin Arabs and other uncivilized peoples do, except that *They are like cattle—nay, they are further astray* (Qur'ān 7:179). Their judgment falls upon the divine Will alone. These are the ones of whom God speaks when He says, *The Bedouin say, 'We believe.'* Say, *'You do not believe; but say, 'We submit,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts'* (Qur'ān 49:14). Such people understand the language of the sword better than the language of books, and that is how they are governed.

The second group are those who utter the Testimonies of Faith, adopting them in conformity with their fathers, mothers, and teachers, but who also live religious lives. They are true Muslims, and they stand above the first group. They are the ones meant by

God's Words, *Men and women who submit, and men and women who believe, and men and women who are devout, and men and women who are truthful, and men and women who are patient, and men and women who are humble, and men and women who are charitable, and men and women who fast, and men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who remember God much—for them God has prepared forgiveness and an immense reward* (Qur'ān 33:35); and His Words, *And whosoever submits his face to God and is virtuous has grasped the firmest handhold; and with God rests the ultimate end of all things* (Qur'ān 31:22).

The third group are those who believe in the religion and go beyond the level of ordinary Muslims, in the sense that they employ reason and argument to defend the sanctity of Islam. Most of the Sunni theologians and hadith masters are among this group. They are not only Muslims but also believers, a more select category than that of just being a Muslim. The Prophet ﷺ made a distinction between Islam and belief (*īmān*) in the Hadith of Gabriel, and so does God Most High when He says, *Men and women who submit, and men and women who believe*; and when He says, *Those are the true believers* (Qur'ān 8:4).

The fourth group are those who rise above this to the level of ice-cold certitude; for belief can be either partial or total. A person who believes something because he is convinced of it in some way is certainly a believer, but total belief is to believe something based on unshakeable proof that itself is based on evidence which does not allow for doubt in any way, whether essentially or circumstantially—to such a degree that one does not allow for the possibility that even a Prophet could contradict it, and one would not believe in any Prophet who did.

Someone might object that with these divisions I am openly positing a hierarchy of faith among the believers. My reply to this is that indeed I am, for that is the way it is. The Prophet ﷺ

said, "Faith is seventy-something branches" (Nasā'ī 5004). He ﷺ also said, "Everyone with so much as a mustard grain's weight of faith in his heart will come out of Hell" (Bukhārī 22). Lexically speaking, faith means belief, and we have already seen that belief can be partial or total.

You might object that there can be no hierarchy in belief, and that in the aforementioned hadiths "faith" means "work". My reply is that the recognized meaning of faith is belief, and that this is its primary meaning, while interpreting it to mean "work" is to wrest it from this primary meaning. The rule is that a word should be taken according to its primary meaning unless there is some proof to the contrary. However, the proof from Revelation is that faith does have a hierarchy, as we have seen.

You might say, "Suppose that we agree that faith does mean belief. What is the proof that belief itself can be categorized?" My answer is that belief means conviction, which is a general term that essentially means the soul's attachment to an idea, be it negativeⁱ or positive. If conviction in the soul corresponds to external reality, then it is a true conviction and an accurate depiction of the thing in question. If the external reality contradicts the soul's conviction and supposition, the latter are faulty. If someone believes Zayd to be white but then finds that he is black, his belief was faulty.

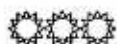
The fifth group are those who believe in the truth of Islam but believe false things about God Most High and His Attributes, which makes them guilty of heretical innovation and iniquity.

The sixth group are those who take this so far that they stray into unbelief, such as those philosophers who believe in Prophethood but think that a Prophet is merely an upright king whose circumstances of birth dictate that he be a good politician, virtuous, versatile, and so on. Such people are unbelievers, and this idea is of no benefit.

i Reading *nafy*, rather than *nafs* (soul) as given in the printed text.

The seventh group are those who profess Islam but secretly harbor total unbelief in their hearts. These are the worst of them all, and they will remain forever in the lowest depths of Hell. Every Community disagrees with this group, though they know of them, and it is rare to find anyone who takes this matter lightly. All Communities believe in the existence of the Creator, although some, in various ways, ascribe to Him partners whom they worship alongside Him, whether stones, living beings, or celestial bodies.

I have entitled this book *The Ascensions of the Travelers*. May God, peerless is His perfection, convey us to the correct view, by His majestic Power.





FIRST ASCENSION

It should first be noted that we begin with this Ascension in particular for three reasons. The first is that the aforementioned groups utilize it and do not go beyond it, but our aim is to lift them above it. Secondly, it serves as a prelude to what we will have to say about knowledge of the soul and its faculties, and how the realms of being are parallel to them. Thirdly, it allows us to establish definitions for some key technical terms, so that we do not have to explain them repeatedly later, as well as the distinction between the Unseen Realm and the Visible Realm and the boundary that defines them. We will examine the question of what exactly is the "world" that some say is eternal, others temporal.

The Ascensions which we will examine are seven in number. "Ascension" means upward movement, as in ascending a ladder. Words have two aspects of meaning. One concerns corporeal things, such as the concept of ascending a ladder. The other concerns the meaning and spirit behind corporeal things, whether this be the primary meaning of the term or a figurative metaphorical usage of it. The traveler seeking knowledge of his Sublime Creator aspires to rise out of the darkness of ignorance and the lowest depths of dumb animals and ignorant humans. The arguments and proofs that lead to knowledge resemble a physical ladder leading to a higher place, with the individual arguments, logical premises, and parts that constitute this process resembling the rungs. To call this an ascension is therefore entirely apt, and this is also implied by

the Words of God Most High: *God, Lord of the ascensions; the angels and the Spirit ascend to Him* (Qur'ān 70:3-4). Anyone who is convinced by rational proofs that the Almighty Creator does not exist in a physical place such that anything could ascend to Him must search for a metaphysical meaning for this statement. God Most High has also condemned Pharaoh for believing that there could be a material way of ascending to Him, saying: *Pharaoh said, "Hāmān, build me a tower so that I may reach the routes—the routes of the heavens—and look upon the God of Moses!"* (Qur'ān 40:36-37), and then saying, *Thus were Pharaoh's evil deeds made to seem good to him, and he was turned from the way* (Qur'ān 40:37).

Demonstrative proofs, then, are the ladders by which mankind reach their Lord; and ignorance of these proofs is what is referred to as "veils." God Most High says as much when He describes the unbeliever, saying: *Or like the darkness of a deep sea, covered by a wave, above it a wave, above it clouds—layer upon layer of darkness! When he holds out his hand, he can scarcely see it. And he to whom God grants no light, has no light* (Qur'ān 24:40). He refers to false beliefs as darkness, and compares the churning of doubt to the churning waves of the sea. The Messenger of God ﷺ said, "God has seventy veils of light and darkness. If He were to raise them, the rays of His Face would burn everything His gaze fell upon."ⁱ These veils mean nothing other than the paths that lead to Him. If they are proofs, then they are veils of light; if they are doubts, they are veils of darkness. The proof of this is in his words, "the rays of His Face would burn," since if the veils were

i This hadith is found in Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr* 5664, with the wording, "God Almighty is behind seventy thousand veils of light and darkness. Any soul that sensed the tiniest sound from those veils would die on the spot." It is also narrated by Muslim (*Ṣaḥīḥ*, 293) with the wording, "His veil is Light; if He raised it, the rays of His Face would burn up any of His creation who looked upon it."

corporeal, one's face would be burned by the first ones of them, or else by some of them; but the conditional clause [in the hadith] relates to their totality only.ⁱ

The ultimate proof, however, is that it is not possible for the Glorious Creator to be physically veiled. This is for two reasons. Firstly, only corporeal beings can be veiled, and God Most High is not a body. Secondly, the veils would have to be in the direction of the Creator, but He is entirely beyond direction. What the Prophet ﷺ meant was that if all of the obstacles to knowing God were removed for the spiritual traveler, the proof by which he achieved that would burn away all that his sight fell upon—"burning" being a metaphor for obliteration. That is the true meaning of these expressions and the content of these allusions.

The world is the ladder to knowledge of the Glorious Creator, the divine script in which divine meanings are inscribed. Intelligent beings in their varying levels are able to read it; and the meaning of their reading it is that they understand the wisdom that points to it. God says, *Say, 'Behold what is in the heavens and the earth'* (Qur'ān 10:101); *We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves* (Qur'ān 41:53); and *Can there be doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth?* (Qur'ān 14:10). Yet since man is veiled and composed of different opposing materials, and is veiled from the Unseen realm—by which we mean all that is beyond the perception of the senses and cannot be known without effort, vigilance, and contemplation—the divine Wisdom singled him out and made him a comprehensive, embellished volume, thereby conferring upon him two favors.

The first was that He blessed him by granting him certain wondrous things to serve as keys for what is beyond his senses,

i Meaning that the wording of the conditional clause "if He were to raise them" implies "all of them."

as He says: *And in your souls—will you not then see?* (Qur'ān 51:21). This made him able to take what he sees in himself and infer from it things which he cannot see. Rational arguments and proofs are divided into those that are complete and those that are incomplete, and are composed according to certain sound conditions. Most ordinary people are unaware of this, and their minds are swayed more easily by commonsense claims, examples, and inference. Because of this, the divine Wisdom endowed the human form with many things analogous to the wonders and marvels of the realms of being, in order that they might serve as bases for visible likenesses of and analogies for things unseen. The Prophets most often addressed mankind using examples of this kind, because it is difficult to reach them in any other way. God says, *Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel* (Qur'ān 16:125). That is why we put this Ascension first, and why we confine ourselves to it when addressing the masses, who as we noted earlier are divided into two levels. This, then, is the first of those two favors and wisdoms.

The second itself has two aspects; one meriting punishment if neglected, the other meriting reward if upheld. The first is that such arguments must only be used for things which the person trusts in and holds to be palpably and evidently true. One must not go beyond this or burden him with more than he can bear. It is possible to be so respectful that one crosses the line into disrespect; for "when a thing is taken beyond its limit, it becomes its opposite."

Secondly, such arguments must not be based on shaky ground; one must not make decisive statements about the Unseen based on undecisive claims about the visible world. The difference between this and the method that God enjoins is that He tells us to employ wisdom, which means to advise or rebuke a person without making decisive claims, while one who misuses the method makes decisive claims about the conclusions he reaches through such analogies.

For example, a person may claim that the Glorious Creator has a form like the human form, or that His knowledge is like ours, or that His power is like ours, thereby falling into the error of anthropomorphism. God Most High says, *I did not make them witness to the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor to their own creation* (Qur'ān 18:51). Therefore, when using this approach we must limit ourselves to things we have personally witnessed, or things ascertained empirically by the experts in the field of anatomy across the ages, which presents no problem.

Once you understand all this, and you grasp the meaning of the Prophet's ﷺ words, "God created Adam in His image (Bukhārī 6227)," and how this means that He created him in a manner that resembles the world, know also that "man" is the name for the mortal rational animal who stands upright and is given to laughing.ⁱ This definition covers man's soul and body in order to differentiate him from other living beings, for to say "rational animal" would cover his soul alone.

Now the totality of this rational animal, man, is divided into three constituents: soul (*nafs*), spirit (*rūḥ*), and body (*jism*). The body is the thing composed of matter and elements which bears his spirit and soul, the upright form with a face, two hands, and two legs, which is given to laughing. The spirit is the thing that runs through the veins and arteries.ⁱⁱ The soul is the self-subsisting substance that does not exist in a place or dwell in a locus. Let us

i This follows Aristotle, who considers laughter to be a unique characteristic (*idion*) of human beings.

ii This definition of the spirit is at odds with what Ghazālī says in other works, which has led W. Montgomery Watt and others to question the authenticity of this treatise as a work of Ghazālī. However, it is common for there to be some fluidity in the definitions of soul and spirit in the Islamic tradition, even in the works of a single author, or indeed within the same text, as is the case in this treatise. Ghazālī, like many Muslim thinkers, did not necessarily have fixed definitions for such terms, but rather used them flexibly depending on the angle from which he was approaching the subject.

discuss each one in as much detail as the matter at hand requires, beginning with the body, since this will lay the ground for what we have to say about the soul.

God Most High says, *We created man from an extract of clay* (Qur'ān 23:12); *So when I have shaped him and breathed into him of My Spirit...* (Qur'ān 15:29). Thus, the Almighty speaks of three things: body, spirit, and soul. The meaning of the spirit is the innate heat dispersed through the nerves and muscles; it exists even in animals and is what makes them alive. The difference between the human and the animal is the soul, which God attributes to Himself when He says, *[I have] breathed into him of My Spirit*. If a human being possessed only that soul and not also the spirit created for all animals, he would not engage in the activities of animals such as eating, procreation, and work. Conversely, if animals were endowed with the soul that was instilled in man, they would be intelligent and morally accountable. This can only mean that man is endowed with spirit, soul, and body, while animals possess only bodies and spirits.

Adam ﷺ was created from earth, water, air, and fire, as is implied by the Words of God Most High, *We created man from an extract of clay* (Qur'ān 23:12), and, *from water We made every living thing* (Qur'ān 21:30); the constituent of fire is implied by His Words, *He created man from sounding clay like pottery* (Qur'ān 55:14). The first stage was earth, which formed clay when mixed with water. Then as the ages passed over it, the sun dried it so that it became sounding clay. Rational proof tell us that the heat of the sun was conveyed to it through the air, and therefore it is established by proofs from Revelation and reason alike that Adam ﷺ was composed in the aforementioned manner. In this way God Most High established the gradual formation of Adam's progeny from the sperm-drop that issued from him to be incubated within the female until its faculties were developed enough for it to come into the

world at the moment when the creation was completed. Thus, man is first a drop, then a clot, then a morsel, then his bones develop and are clothed with flesh. The sperm-drop that issues from man is a seed like the husk of a grain, except that it is liquid; and it resembles a date-pit in that the tall date palm contains them, but they are bunched together. Anyone who has seen for themselves the growth of fruit will be aware of this. The pomegranate, for example, grows from the tiniest of seeds, yet you see this tiny shape grow as it is nourished from without by things that are appropriate for it, until finally it reaches its complete form. Anyone who looks at emitted semen will understand this, for you will see that it forms something like drawn lines and beads like *nigella* pods. This is obvious and needs no great amount of reflection. A sperm-drop is a liquid seed by nature, bearing the nature of the one who emits it naturally and without any artifice being required. That is why son resembles father in appearance and character.

You might say, "Food becomes blood in the liver, and then becomes sperm; but before that it was plants which issued from the four humors. Why, then, does the child resemble the father, when its origin is from other things?"

The answer is that that is indeed true, but what matters is the point of separation from the father, because at that separation it issues from his veins and from his liver with a particular motion, and it is then that it acquires its nature. This chain links all the way back to Adam, which is where it stops; for his body and soul were not taken from another Adam, since that would imply an infinite regression, which is impossible. There must by necessity have been a first of the species.

Let us now move on. The human form has four primary constituents: the head, the arms, the torso, and the legs. He has two hundred and forty-eight bones: forty-two in the head, eighty-two in the second quarter, forty in the third, and eighty-four in the

fourth. God the Glorious then created tendons to hold these bones together, there being three hundred and sixty veins in the human body, allowing for movement, contraction, and expansion. The chief of these is in the heart, and is called the aorta. In the heart it is like the King's chamberlain, who receives his edicts and issues them to the servants. These veins are connected to the stomach, where they absorb the energy from the food and drink that enter it, and then distribute it to the liver, pancreas, spleen, and lungs. The aorta is stout and firm, extending to the upper back, the waist, the ureters, the chest, and the clavicles. It is the great river of the body, dividing into four veins to cover the four body parts, each having its own vein. The vein of the head divides into sixty more, and the veins of the arms and legs divide into two hundred more.

The first part of the first river consists of four rivers, from which two veins divide from the upper back to water the neck. From the chest two veins divide between the clavicles to rise to the neck, namely the jugulars. From each of them two other veins divide. All of these veins provide channels for nutrients to reach each part of the head, such as the lips and all the rest.

In the second quarter of the body, another river flows from the great river, from which two veins divide for each arm at the chest from the clavicles to between the shoulders. These are called the cephalic veins. From each of them divide four more veins to nourish the upper arms. This makes ten veins, five for each arm, from each of which another four divide for the forearms. This makes fifty veins, twenty-five for each forearm. From each of these fifty, other veins divide to supply the palms and fingers.

In the third quarter, the torso, two veins divide from the ureters to the arms, from each of which divide twenty-nine veins to nourish various parts of the torso: thirty-four for the ribs, and twenty-six for the other parts. The coccyx has two, the loins four, the kidneys two, the bladder two, the stomach two, the liver two,

the spleen two, the heart two, the gallbladder two, the lungs two, the breasts two, and the ribs thirty, two for each rib.

In the fourth quarter, the legs, the iliac artery divides into two veins that flow into the upper legs, one for each thigh, running from the pelvis. They branch into four veins on each side, which then branch into fifty running down into the lower legs, twenty-five in each.

In this way, the human body corresponds to the wider world in its general form and particular details. Man resembles the macrocosm and the elements of water, air, fire, and earth that it contains. He reflects the terrestrial substances: the animal in his possession of the animal spirit; the vegetable in his growth in the aforementioned manner and his nourishment through the veins; and the mineral in his bones. Thus, the resemblance is total.

Compare his constituent parts to those of the world, and you will find the same resemblance. To explain this fully would take many lifetimes to achieve. Test it for yourself with everything that you observe in the outer world, and you will find that the realm of your body contains the same. Indeed, man possesses traits analogous to those of the animals: the boldness of the lion, the viciousness of the fox, the impulsiveness of the ape, the stubbornness of the pig, and so on.

After food is retained in the stomach, the liver cooks it by means of heat and moisture in the stomach from the right side. By this means it draws out the best part of the food and every part that is hot and moist because of the resemblance between them, which allows it to refine the food with its substance. It contains tubes like a sieve. The veins draw the nourishment and transport it so that it moves through the body as we described. As for the gallbladder, which also sits on the right side of the stomach near the liver and is also known as the "yellow gallbladder," its function is to mix the part of the food that is dry and hot like its own nature, and to

refine it with its substance and then pass it to the veins as described earlier. The third mixing is the "black" one, effected by the spleen, which is cold and dry and attached to the stomach on the left side. It too draws out the food that resembles its nature. The fourth is affected by phlegm, which is cold and moist and is associated with the lungs. It too draws out the food that resembles its nature. The windpipe at the top of the lung shares the nature of the spleen; its purpose is to effect breathing. The opening of the windpipe is covered by a flap, above which hangs the uvula. The heart is on the left side of the chest beneath the left breast. The womb is on the right side, linked by veins to the heart. This is the seat of appetites. The stomach has a balanced temperament; it is like a pot, and the other organs are like the stones of the cooking-fire on which it sits. It has two apertures, one for entrance from the mouth via the gullet, the other for the expulsion of waste.

Thus, the stomach is served by four faculties: attraction, retention, digestion, and expulsion. The attractive faculty is hot and moist, nourishing the blood and drawing food and drink from the mouth to the stomach. Everything that shares its nature becomes blood. It covers the bottom of the stomach and the belly, emerges without a changed odor, and resembles the southerly wind. The retentive faculty is cold and dry, nourishing the black bile and retaining food and drink in the stomach, which would be unable to retain them without it. It emerges with a changed odor, and resembles the northerly wind. The attractive and retentive faculties are opposites, which keeps them balanced. The digestive faculty nourishes the yellow bile and digests food with heat, assisted by the liver. It rises from the stomach to the mouth without a changed odor. It is hot and dry like the evening wind. The expulsive faculty is cold and moist, nourishing the phlegm. Its purpose is to make food and drink pass from the stomach to the intestines, then the

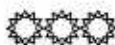
bowels, then the earth. Its coolness and moisture form an equilibrium with the digestive faculty.

The well-being or disorder of the humors depends on these factors. The purpose and benefit of natural science is to see to their welfare. By proximity to these humors, the soul acquires certain dispositions when they are out of balance, such as impulsiveness and anger when yellow bile dominates; sadness, anxiety, and lethargy when black bile dominates; and so on, just as a person takes on the character of his close friend. When the humors are in balance, the soul is more likely to be well. All of this is by the decree and direction of God Most High; there is no god but Him.

When one reflects upon this orderly and balanced system, and how the faculties achieve equilibrium by means of one another; how the hand was created for grasping and striking, the tongue for speech, and the eye for vision; and how the latter was created in a manner that allows light to penetrate it, a fixed body in a delicate shell covered by lids with lashes to protect them from dust and bright light—when one reflects upon all this, one knows that it can only mean that this marvelous creation and wondrous command must be the work of an All-Knowing, Directing Creator. No person endowed with insight could fail to see this, for we find that this human form is constructed with the most perfect wisdom that any mind could envisage. The only possibilities are that this wondrous creation made itself, or that an inanimate being made it, or that a living being made it, or that it was created by God Most High. It cannot have made itself, because the existence of the cause must precede that of the effect, and a thing cannot be both the agent and the object of an action at the same time. Nor could it have been created by an inanimate object, because inanimate objects cannot be agents of action. Nor could it be the work of a created living being, even “nature” itself; for what does “nature” mean? It must either be animate or inanimate. If it is inanimate, then we have

already seen the response. If it is animate, then we say that either this animate being has an agent, or it does not. If you say that it has an agent other than itself, then nature is just like Adam in the sense that it must have been brought into being by something else. If you say that nature is alive and has no agent or cause, then it is God Himself, and you ought to say "God" instead of "nature," since that is what you actually mean. An infinite beginningless chain of contingent beings is impossible. We might posit that one nature affected another, and so on; but that is not a satisfactory argument, because the chain of contingent beings must have a beginning that has no cause and is not the object of any agent. This refutes the claim of some that Adam came from another Adam—for that too would be an infinite regression, which is impossible.

It is clear, therefore, that the human form provides evidence of its Maker and Designer, alongside all the wonders it contains which mirror those of the wider world. For every curious and challenging thing in the world, the human form provides the key to understanding it. God, the Hallowed and Most High, created it in a manner that mirrors the world, such that it is a microcosm of it. Consider the Prophets and their miracles, the saints and their gifts, and the faculties with which God has endowed the soul—which indeed everybody witnesses firsthand in dreams, which reveal truths about the Unseen and the future. In a dream one may behold the heavens and earth in all their incomprehensible vastness, or see the immense heavens reduced to the size of a coin, which is truly a wondrous thing. Anyone who reflects upon all this will know that these marvels must be the work of a Maker, and under the direction of a Director. The wonders of man are beyond counting, and he is endowed with many marvelous special properties which are of great use to physicians. Glory be to the All-Knowing Originator!





SECOND ASCENSION

The First Ascension is simple to explain, its wisdom being obvious and its proof manifest, for its light shines so brightly that no one can question it unless his mind is completely inverted and reversed; *And one whom God leads astray can have no guide* (Qur'ān 13:33). Let us now turn to the Second Ascension, which is for two kinds of people: intelligent truth-seekers, and God-conscious people of acumen.

The subject of this Ascension is the nature of the soul and the question of its immortality. This Ascension is like the axis of all other sciences. It is the goal of all who strive, the object of all who work. There is nothing more valuable than it, because without it there would be no meaning to any of the teachings of Prophethood: reward and punishment, Paradise and Hell, and all the other teachings of the Messengers concerning this life and the Next. For if the soul were not immortal, all of the things of which we have been told, and which we desire, would be meaningless. Our efforts toward them will therefore depend on the extent to which we trust in its immortality; and as long as it is beyond our senses, we must contemplate them in theory. The unbelief of the materialists is rooted in this issue, because they believe that man is a being of balanced constitution like a plant, and that as long as his faculties are in equilibrium he will endure; but when he becomes dominated by heat or cold he will become corrupted and expire, after which he will cease to exist and never live, die, or be

resurrected again. For this reason, they disdain their fellow man and repudiate the Prophets, as Umayya ibn Khalaf did when he said to one of the Companions, *I shall surely be given wealth and children* (Qur'ān 19:77). He said this to mock the idea that the faithful will be given riches in the Hereafter, as though his own worldly riches would be a match for them.

This Ascension, then, is of central concern to mankind. It is the foundation of all knowledge, such that nothing else can be affirmed without it. This is why—and God knows best—the Messengers did not elucidate it. The words of ordinary people may be accepted or rejected, believed or denied; but the words of the Messengers are not like that, and if they were to speak about things that are highly abstruse and difficult for most minds to comprehend, they might be misunderstood. Therefore, they only spoke about such matters allusively and symbolically, the way that the Glorious Qur'ān says, *They ask you about the Spirit. Say, 'The Spirit is from the command of my Lord'* (Qur'ān 17:85); and that God Most High says that Jesus  was *His Word which He cast to Mary, and a Spirit from Him* (Qur'ān 4:171); or that the Prophet  said, "The spirits of the martyrs are in the breasts of green birds" (Tirmidhi 1641).¹ All of these are plain and evident to those who know, and comprehensible to others.

People have differed concerning this issue across the ages. Plato held that the soul and spirit are one, and that this is the Universal Soul, which is to bodies as the sun is to the earth: shining its rays upon every place, with each place taking its share according to its capacity. He also said that the soul has a certain natural affinity with the body, and that when it enters it, it bonds with it and becomes enamored of it and remains within it. He believed not that the soul indwells in the body, but rather that its relationship to it is

¹ A leader of Quraysh and major opponent of Islam, slain at the Battle of Badr.

like that of magnetism to iron with regard to their inseparability, reactivity, and natural affinity. Neither one dwells in the other, but the one reacts to the other by means of a subtle natural mediator and remains there until the body is destroyed, just as eventually iron degrades to the point that it is no longer magnetic.

Others have said that the soul is an accident, and that the meaning of life is a state resulting from the equilibrium of constitution, so that when a person dies his spirit ceases to exist. They believe that the soul is created, while Plato's view was that it is eternal. A third group believe that it is created at the moment the body is created, but that thereafter it is immortal. Those philosophers who arrived at the truth took this view, but the majority adopted Plato's theory. We shall explain the errors in their approaches, God willing, in the third Ascension when we examine the created nature of the higher world. For now, our discussion will comprise three parts. The first examines the faculties of the soul and how they cause the body to move. The second concerns the nature of the soul as a non-spatial, self-subsisting substance without need for a locus. The third concerns the immortality of the soul.

The Faculties of the Soul and How They Cause the Body to Move

A person unaware of the truth might suppose that Revelation forbids the discussion of this topic, whether to affirm or to deny it. Yet there is no evidence of that in the sacred law, and in fact the Almighty's Words *The Spirit is from the command of my Lord* (Qur'ān 17:85) indicate the opposite, if the word "command" is understood directly. If He had meant to forbid such discussions, He would have stated this plainly.

We examined the faculties of the body earlier. Now, this body is to the soul like clothing to the body: the body moves the clothing

by means of its extremities, and the soul moves the body by means of certain subtle and apposite faculties. The faculties of the soul manifest in various places in the body, numbering perhaps as many as ten, as we shall see. The soul itself is one; the names refer only to its instruments. For example, we speak of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch, but the soul is the one that tastes, smells, and perceives. These are the five external faculties. The proof that it is the soul that perceives, rather than the extremities themselves, is that when the nerves are impaired in some way that blocks the soul's connection to them, such as numbness or death, they no longer function. This is observable truth and requires no further proof.

The faculties are divided into two categories: locomotive (*muharrika*), and perceptive (*mudrika*). The perceptive faculties also comprise two categories: external, and internal. We have already listed the external ones; the internal are three in number: imagination (*khayāliyya*), estimation (*wahmiyya*), and contemplation (*fikriyya*). Imagination is at the front of the brain, behind the faculty of sight. Its purpose is to retain the images of things that are seen after the eyes are closed and the senses are no longer fixed upon them, it is also called the common sense.

Estimationⁱ is the faculty that perceives meaning. Imagination concerns the potential, image, and substance of a meaning, while estimation retains the meaning itself, divested from its image and substance. The sheep perceives the threat of the wolf, and flees from it; the lamb perceives the tenderness of its mother, and cleaves to it. It resides in the rear lobe of the brain.

Contemplation is the faculty that combines different images. It resides in the middle lobe between the faculties that retain image

i This could also be translated as "intuition."

and meaning. Its nature is to weave different concepts together, as is alluded to in these verses:ⁱ

Two men—one a tailor, the other a weaver—
Are face to face on Spica Virginis.ⁱⁱ
One weaves cloaks for those departing,
The other sews garments for those arriving.

The physical seats of these faculties can be observed by the science of medicine. When an illness befalls that part of the body, the corresponding faculty loses function. They say that the faculty in which the images of the objects of sensation are imprinted preserves those images, so that they are retained in it after being received by the five senses repeatedly. A thing may retain something by means of something other than the faculty of its apprehension. Water can be impressed upon, but does not retain what is impressed upon it; but wax receives what is impressed upon it due to its moistness, and then retains it due to its dryness. The retentive faculty (*hāfiza*) preserves what the imagination receives, just as memory (*dhākira*) preserves what the retentive faculty receives.

The locomotive faculty is either an instigator of motion or a direct mover. The instigator is the faculty of arousal and passion; when it sees something that it desires or fears, it instigates the faculty of direct movement into action, and the nerves, tendons, and muscles are stirred into motion from the heart into either expanding in the direction of that thing, or contracting away from it. When it is satisfied, the blood in the veins becomes excited, producing joy. When it is dissatisfied, it becomes withdrawn, and the animal spirit is withdrawn to the heart so that it feels dejection and sorrow.

i The author has not been identified.

ii A star in the constellation of Virgo with the Arabic name *al-simāk al-aʿzal*.

It is also the nature of the soul to apprehend information that is outside the range of its senses. In this regard it has two faculties: the active (*'amaliyya*), and the knowing (*'ilmiyya*).ⁱ The active faculty is the prime mover of the human body toward the human skills and crafts. The knowing faculty is that which apprehends information detached from matter and form, meaning the universal detached principles, which belong to the order of the intellect. It is this faculty that receives knowledge from the angels, while the other faculty sees to those corporeal duties that are assigned to it.

All of these matters are directly observable by the senses, and so we shall not waste time discussing them at length. Most of the things we said about the bodily faculties are also of this order, and for those that are not we may safely rely on the experts in anatomy, although there are more faculties than we could mention. From this you should understand the body and the animal faculties; how the soul is the mover and instigator; and how the relationship between its faculties and their bodily locations is like the way that a single garment has different parts with their own names, such as the sleeves and the neck. We have seen that the soul has two faculties, the active and the knowing, and that the knowing faculty has the potential to receive information without limit. We have also seen that the body reacts to the locomotive faculty, and that the locomotive active faculty is under the control of the knowing faculty of instigation and passion, from which the action begins its journey to outward culmination.

You might say, "But why is the soul invisible? Seeing it would prove its existence. Why can we not imagine it?"

There are two questions here: "Why is the soul invisible?" and "Why can we not imagine it?" The first question has three answers.

i In *Mizān al-'amal* the author elaborates further on these faculties and their link to practical and theoretical knowledge respectively.

Firstly, it is not necessary for something to be visible in order for it to exist. The properties of a thing can be essential or accidental. Existence is an essential property, whereas visibility is accidental, since a thing can exist without there being anyone to see it. The fact that no one can see it does not make it nonexistent. The proof for this is the existence of the Glorious Creator without beginning or end: the fact that He is not seen does not invalidate His existence. It is true that existence must be established by some means or other; yet for some things, that proof may be intellectual or be established through an effect that is observable to the senses. We have observed the effects of the soul, and most certainly the existence of our own souls, and we know that there must be something in us other than our bodies, since the body remains after death with no spirit in it, and the fetus in the womb is fully formed by the fourth month though there is no spirit in it.

Secondly, for a thing to be visible it must lie in a given direction and a given distance from the observer, and it must have color, since that is what makes a thing visible to the eye. Yet we say that the soul has no color, for color is composed of different things that are assembled together.

Thirdly, a visible thing must be confined to space; but as we shall prove later, the intellectual faculty is beyond space.

The Substance of the Soul

The soul is a self-subsisting substance. It is necessary to explain this term, so we must begin by saying that the word "soul" is used in various ways. The nutritive faculty is sometimes called a soul, as are the faculties of growth and vegetation. However, those are not what we mean by soul here. The first soul is the vegetative, then the nutritive, then the faculty of growth, then the animal soul. This is the first level of the soul's emergence from potentiality into

actuality. The animal soul is the completion of the natural body, by which it senses and moves. It is common to humans and animals. This soul is the heat instilled in the sperm- drop, and the blood collected in the womb is like its receptacle. When the sperm falls upon the blood and they mix together in the womb, it covers it like cream on milk. The heat of the womb causes them to knit together, and its innate heat grows warmer by drawing on heat from outside. The first thing that develops is the heart, and then the nerves and veins spread out and the body parts form around them until the extremities of the fetus are fully formed. The period between the day the sperm drops falls into the womb and the day the child is born is three-quarters of a full solar cycle. The drop draws heat from the mother, and the mother from food. When the ninth month arrives, it becomes like a rough piece of rope soaked in pure oil, ready to burst into flames with the least spark. This is merely a simile; the reality is subtler and more profound.

The animal soul, then, is the core of nutrition, growth, and constitution. When it reaches this level, it earns the status of soul from the divine Generosity. God Most High brings a power into existence from the realm of Command: as He says, *Say, 'The Spirit is from the command of my Lord'* (Qur'ān 17:85); *a Spirit from Our command* (Qur'ān 42:52); *So when I have shaped him and breathed into him of My Spirit* (Qur'ān 15:29). The entire world, from the ranges of the ninth sphereⁱ above to what lies below our feet, is filled with hosts and angels: *None knows the hosts of your Lord but He* (Qur'ān 74:31). Natural science has established that there can be no other realm outside the ninth sphere, that there is no such thing as a void, and that everything the Creator has brought into existence is within the bounds of that sphere. As for bodies, they are transitory compositions of the four humors, and

i The farthest limit of the Ptolemaic model.

everything within the sphere of the moonⁱ is transitory and subject to change. The humors transform into each other, and all other things are substances with different causes. The [human] soul is one of those substances, not composed of the humors; it is purely spiritual, a minute soul that is equal to the soul of the macrocosm.

As we have said repeatedly, the composition of man reflects the composition of the universe. The soul is a subtle spiritual substance. Anyone who denies this ought to think again. He should observe the rays of the sun and their spiritual and subtle nature, such that the disc of the sun can be observed at sunset and its rays at sunrise, yet all it takes is for it to be hidden behind a mountain, and the rays that shone forth at sunrise are cut off. If those rays were physical bodies, they could never be cut off in that manner. Likewise, if you take a mirror and reflect the light off it, it will shine wherever you direct it, and you may then cut it off from that place instantly; and the substance of the light is in fact gross when compared to the substance of the soul. There is no place or corner on earth that is not filled with only God Most High knows what. This is why the Prophet ﷺ enjoined us to cover ourselves even in private, and for a man and his wife not to be naked when they make love. God Most High says of man, *Not a word does he utter but there is a watcher ready beside him* (Qur'ān 50:18); and, *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein* (Qur'ān 50:16). The world is crammed with spirits.

The reason I draw such attention to this is to show how the soul has something akin to a constitution from which it is formed, and which shares its subtle nature. After the animal spirit arrives, God Most High brings into being a soul, a subtle spiritual substance with the natural potential to know things and recognize its Creator. It links with the body and engages with it, and develops with it until it

i The first sphere in that model.

is so familiar with it and devoted to it that cannot conceive of itself without it. Through God's wisdom, this is how bodies come into motion. It is like iron, which is a motionless inanimate object; but when something is added to it that reinforces its nature and special properties, it has a powerful effect on it, and it becomes a locus for the activity of the Universal Soul, so that the iron moves, running here and there, appearing as if alive. It remains like this until that effect subsides and those angels depart from it. The soul remains with the body, supplied by the angels from without by means of speech, although this is something that only those who know are able to recognize. The Lawgiver ﷺ told us that good comes from the angels and evil from Satan, which means that the angels must play a role in this. The soul is spiritual, and therefore it is able to receive from spiritual beings and be influenced by them. Were it not for those intellects called angels, which supply the soul from outside, it would not be able to comprehend anything. The soul has only the potential for knowledge; it is the angels who bring this potential into actuality so that it becomes actually knowing.

The highest level of this angelic supply belongs to the Prophets ﷺ, then to those who come after them, which is attained by refinement of the soul and devotion to this vocation. That is the meaning of the Words of God Most High, *I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit* (Qur'ān 5:110), and what He says about the saints, *For such He has written faith upon their hearts, and strengthened them with a Spirit from Him* (Qur'ān 58:22). There is an unlimited hierarchy among mankind regarding the extent to which they receive this angelic transmission. Some do not receive anything at all, and it is they of whom God says, *They are like cattle; nay, they are further astray from the way* (Qur'ān 25:44). The reason God created the soul was to test the human being. If He had brought it into being divested of matter, it would not be able to disobey Him, and therefore He placed it within matter, as He says, *that*

We might see how you would behave (Qur'ān 10:14). Thus, the angels were aware that a material being would inevitably sin, and so they said, *Will You appoint therein one who will do corruption therein and shed blood?* (Qur'ān 2:30).

The soul, then, acquires perfection in its body in order that it may join with the angels or the devils: with the highest, or with the lowest. Furthermore, it is alive; the fact that it exists alongside the body does not mean that it ceases to exist when the body does, for they do not share the same constitution. The proof of this is that the souls of the angels and the essences of the spheres do not change unless their Creator wills it, and the spheres receive this in their substance. Moreover, annihilation means the breakdown of the composite, but the soul is simple, not composite. The proof of this is that it possesses knowledge of intellectual matters and aspects of the Unseen such as Prophethood and soothsaying; and any learned and intelligent person must agree that the body alone could not know such things, since the body's temperament means the equilibrium of humors within it, and the humors are themselves bodies. It is impossible that the body be perceptive or rational; a perceptive and rational substance can only be related to that of the angels.

Each thing conforms only to its own kind. Since the body is dense, it is directed toward labor, motion, and corporeal concerns; and since the soul is subtle, it is concerned with volition, appraisal, and knowledge, all of which have their locus in the soul. And since knowledge is indivisible, its locus too must be indivisible. Furthermore, if the body's motion came from itself, the motion of the spheres would have to come from themselves as well, but it has been demonstrated that their motion comes from without. No object in motion can be its own mover, nor could its mover be another body, for then it would require its own mover in turn. This means that its mover must be incorporeal; and incorporeal

things are neither composite nor corruptible. Corruption is the breakdown of something composed of differing constituents, as their bonds separate. As was stated previously, the soul is not composite, which means that it cannot break down. That which cannot break down must endure, and therefore the soul is immortal.

Furthermore, anything that is a substance must either be self-subsisting or else be as the theologians believe. They hold all substances to be the same, and do not distinguish between the substance of the soul and the substance of the body. For them, substances only differ because of accidents, and therefore they deem it impossible that one substance could dwell in another or subsist in it. If the body is a substance and the soul is too, then the soul cannot be an attribute of the body or of a higher order than it, since they are both substances. Therefore, if the soul cannot be a substance or an accident then it must be a substance that subsists through itself, not through an accident or another substance.

You might say, "It is inconceivable that the intellect could be neither substance nor accident. As for a third kind of substance, no such thing is known to exist." Our response would be that this is entirely meaningless, and there is nothing in the intellect to support such a claim. This categorization is merely a product of observation, since you have never observed anything that is not either accident or substance. This is an argument from analogy, which is fallacious. If God Most High allows me the opportunity, I will author a book examining the different types of argument.ⁱ This means that the third concept must be true.

In that case, it must be that it is either necessary for the soul to have a locus, or possible for it to have one, or impossible for it to have one. Now, it cannot be necessary for the soul to have a

i This may be an allusion to the author's *Mī'yār al-'ilm* (The Yardstick of Knowledge), his most comprehensive work on logic.

locus, because intellectual necessities are always true regardless of circumstance; that would entail that the soul must never be without a locus—which is observably untrue, since it leaves the body. The soul must therefore experience a time when it has no locus. Even if we said that it transferred from one body to another, it would have to be between bodies during that transference; and if a law is absolutely binding it cannot be broken even for an instant. In any case, the claim that it translocates to another body requires evidence, and there is no such evidence. Since it has been demonstrated that it is not necessary for the soul to have a locus, the question remains as to whether or not it is possible for it to have one. If something is possible for a thing, there must be something to determine whether or not that possibility is actualized. That determiner can only have influence on a locus if that locus is receptive of influence, and we have already shown that the soul cannot be fused with the body. We must therefore conclude that it is impossible for it to have a locus.

The Immortality of the Soul

We have seen how different factions have differed regarding the nature of the soul. In relation to our current concern, we can divide these varying opinions into two broad categories. Firstly, there is the opinion that the soul is eternal, as Plato said. He argued that the Glorious Creator is the cause of its existence, and that a thing does not cease to exist as long as its cause exists; and since the Creator will never cease to exist, the soul will never do so either. Other major philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā said that the soul is created. However, they all agreed that it will never cease to exist, which is also what the Prophets ﷺ taught. God Most High says, *For them shall be Gardens beneath which rivers flow, therein to abide forever* (Qur'ān 5:119); *Count not those who were slain in*

God's cause as dead. Nay, they are alive with their Lord, provided for (Qur'ān 3:169). He says of the soul of the unbeliever, He will neither die therein nor live (Qur'ān 87:18), and says of the inhabitants of Paradise, There they will taste no death beyond the first death (Qur'ān 44:56).

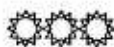
Hence there are two broad factions. The first are those who say that the soul ceases to exist. All schools of thought reject this view despite their many disagreements on other matters. No one believes it but the materialists, who are of no account.

The second are those who say that the soul has an origin. The Islamic philosophersⁱ and those who follow revealed religions agree that it is originated and has a beginning, but that it is a substance that cannot cease to exist. Some of the philosophers also say that it is originated, but their perspective is based on that of Plato, and so the meaning of origination for them is the transformation of the quiddity of a substance. For example, when water is placed over fire and evaporates, for them it does not cease to exist but rather is transformed into air, and the same is true when air is transformed into fire. For them, origination means a change of state in the substance. If you understand this you will see that for them, the origination of the soul means the transformation of its substance from one state to another, like water being transformed into air. Therefore, their ultimate position—and God knows best—is that the soul is born of the elements that arise from the sphere of the moon and react to the other spheres due to the influence of the rays of the stars. However, they hold that there is an inexorable affinity and bond between souls and bodies, and that this begins when the body first comes into existence and draws sustenance, which is divided between the constellations. When the body reacts and

ⁱ Ghazālī is drawing a distinction between philosophers who are formally Muslim and those who conform to the tenets of Sunni doctrine.

comes into the outer world under a particular zodiac sign, the rays of those stars penetrate the body in a particular way, endowing it with a particular nature. They base their opinions about talismanic properties on this view. For them, man himself is a talisman, and they utilize certain vapors, herbs, and substances of the earth to complement the natural effects of the stars. They hold attraction and repulsion among people to be the result of natural influences, and they have a great deal to say about such things.

The position supported by demonstrative proof is that the soul is originated; for the Creator, Exalted is He, possesses the power to create substances that will never cease to exist once created. We shall discuss the basis of their opinions regarding the origination and immortality of the higher world in the Third Ascension, God willing, so there is no need to bring it up here. What we will say here, however, is that a thing cannot cease to exist unless it is susceptible of nonexistence. If the soul is susceptible of nonexistence, there are three possibilities: either nonexistence is in its nature and intrinsic to it; or it can cease to exist if a necessary condition of its existence is absent; or it can cease to exist if its Creator wills that it be so. Now, nonexistence cannot be an intrinsic attribute of the soul, since that would mean that it subsisted for two successive instants, which is impossible.ⁱ Nor can it be said that it endures by satisfying some condition, for we saw earlier that self-subsisting things do not depend on conditions. It is also untrue to say that it could become nonexistent due to the will of its Creator; for the will of the Creator is known only from the Messengersﷺ, and the Messengers have informed us that it will never cease to exist. God is the Patron of Guidance.



i This is a precept of Ash'arite atomistic theology.



THIRD ASCENSION

No intelligent person denies that the contingent corporeal forms in the world of generation and corruption are originated and require a cause for their existence, whether it be the Creator or nature, as we discussed earlier. The entire world of sense and observation, of generation and corruption, is contained within the sphere of the moon. There is a difference of opinion, however, regarding the higher worlds, meaning the souls and intellects of the spheres, and the celestial bodies and other things that they contain. The philosophers say that this is all eternal, and this is a matter of agreement among them as far as doctrine goes, although they employ different modes of expression regarding how it proceeds from the Creator, Whom they call the Principle, and the flow of the Second Principle, which is the cause of all below it, from the Glorious Creator: light flows from the sun, and the light of the sun necessarily exists with it and cannot be nonexistent. For them, the Creator is the cause, which is "with" the effect in natural terms rather than "before" it; the cause precedes the effect as the king precedes the vizier, and the vizier the chamberlain. They also call this origination, action, or emanation, each term being meant figuratively rather than literally.

For them, the world is divided into two categories: that which is self-subsistent, and that which is not. They call non-self-subsisting things "accidents," and consider them to be originated by the revolution of the spheres and the transformations that it

produces: things flow into one another, and substances acquire certain states as a result.

They further divide self-subsisting things into three categories: bodies, which are the basest substances; intellects, which are the noblest beings; and souls, which are the intermediaries between them that bind them together as prepositions bind verbs to nouns, without having an influence on the bodies. They consider there to be ten bodies: nine are heavens, and the tenth consist of the humors, which are the content of the sphere of the moon. They consider the nine heavens to be alive and articulate, with a hierarchy of levels among them. What this means—and God transcends what they say—is that the First Intellect, which is knowledge, emanated from the Creator in the manner we described. Most of them call this the Logos, which is a self-subsisting substance, neither a body nor fused with a body, which is self-aware and aware of its Creator; it is an angel, or some might call it the Pen. Its existence necessitates the existence of three things: an intellect, a soul, and the farthest sphere, the ninth, which is the heaven and its mass. The second intellect necessitates that there be a third intellect, the soul and mass of the sphere of the fixed celestial bodies. The third intellect necessitates that there be a fourth intellect, the soul and mass of the sphere of Saturn. The fourth intellect necessitates that there be a fifth intellect, the soul and mass of the sphere of Jupiter, and so on until the sphere of the moon, then its content, then the matter that forms different combinations due to the motions of the celestial bodies, producing minerals, animals, and plants.

Thus, in their model there are ten intellects and nine spheres, which total nineteen. Some claim that this is what is meant by God's Words, *Nineteen stand over it* (Qur'ān 74:30). Others claim that this refers to the twelve constellations and seven luminaries. That is the essence of their school of thought, and their other sciences revolve around this one. They agree that God Most High is One,

and that this Oneness is indivisible, whether to the senses, to the mind, or otherwise, and that there is no meaning to Him beyond His Essence, whether knowledge, power, or otherwise. This was the position of their major figures, and they all agreed upon it. There may appear to be a contradiction between their respective statements regarding [the nature of] the world, such as the confusion to which Galen gave voice when he said, "I know not whether it is eternal or temporal." However, al-Fārābī, a major proponent of their school, explained that what he meant by this was that the world seemed contradictory to him because it was itself divided between the eternal and the temporal. Thus, he explained, it was merely a matter of context. When they say that the world is temporal, it has two meanings, one literal and the other figurative. The literal meaning is that in the world of generation and corruption, forms are composed of matter. The figurative meaning is that they refer to the First Cause as origination or emanation—which is merely a matter of terminology since in fact they do not believe that the temporal can be produced by the eternal at all.

Let us discuss this further in two sections, one providing proof that the world is temporal, the other examining the arguments for their belief that the heaven is a living being.

(1) They provide several arguments for their position, which we shall now examine. They say that it is impossible for the temporal to proceed from the eternal without an intermediary, since if we say that God existed before time began and nothing existed besides Him, with nothing having come into existence from Him at that point, because He had not yet brought them into existence but only held them with Him in the realm of possibility, and then He created the world—if that were so, there would only be two possibilities: either He remained as He was before, or He came to be endowed with an attribute that facilitated this act of creation. This raises the question of why He chose that particular moment

to act rather than any moment before it. Did He previously lack the ability to do it, and then come to possess it? It cannot be that the desire to do it was originated in Him, for a temporal thing cannot indwell in an eternal being. Nor can it be that He created it in a given locus, and only then desired it.

All of these arguments are false. First, let us consider their claim that if at first, He did not act but then He did, this implies that He underwent a change of state. This is fallacious, because He always possessed knowledge and continued to do so, and the content of His knowledge was that He would bring the world into existence at the moment when He did; and when He turned His intent to creating it at the incipience of its creation, this was a manifestation of action. There is no reason to say that if someone possesses knowledge and power, the object of his knowledge and power must come into existence immediately. The Glorious Creator may not be asked why He does as He does. This refutes their assertion. If they argue that God Most High does not possess knowledge, our answer is that indeed He does, and that His knowledge does not change Him whether it pertains to the past or the future, as can be demonstrably proven.

One proof for the temporality of the world is that if it were eternal, there would be an infinite regression of temporal phenomena. Consider the sun: it completes a revolution in one year, while Saturn takes thirty years, meaning that the sun has orbited thirty times more than Saturn and twelve times more than Jupiter, since its revolution takes twelve years. If the revolutions of Saturn, the sun, and Jupiter were infinite, it would make no sense for either of them to have orbited a fraction of the number of times that the sun had—to say nothing of the stars which, the astronomers tell us, take thirty-six thousand years to complete an orbit.

Consider also that these orbits must either have occurred an odd or even number of times, or both odd and even, or neither

odd nor even. It cannot be neither odd nor even, for a number must be one or the other, which the philosophers themselves hold to be a premise of logic. Likewise, for the same reason, it cannot be both odd and even. If they say that it is even, then by adding one it would become odd, yet how can the infinite be added to? If they say that it is odd, then it must be finite. If they say that an infinite number cannot be conceived of in terms of odd and even, our answer is that this is impossible, for its total can be divided into sixths and tenths, which most certainly can be conceived of.

Their argument can essentially be reduced to asking the Glorious Creator why He chose that time for the incipience of creation rather than any other time. This is a nonsensical objection that proves nothing. All of their prattle can be answered by reference to the divine knowledge and will, for we can say that perhaps it was simply better for them to be created at the moment when they were.

(2) The second section has three parts. The first concerns their opinion that Heaven is alive. The second concerns their claim that Heaven knows the particulars of the world. The third concerns the hierarchy of motion.

(i) They say that Heaven is alive and possesses a soul, and that the relationship between its soul and its body is the same as that between ours. And just as our motions are divided between the instinctual and the deliberate, Heaven too has deliberate as well as instinctual motions, which it makes with the intention of worshipping the Lord of Glory and drawing nearer to Him; for every deliberate motion has a purpose, and that is what distinguishes rational beings from other living things. The intention of drawing nearer, so they say, is for the purpose of becoming like the Glorious Creator—in attributes, not in Essence, for absolute perfection, total splendor, and ultimate goodness belong to God, the Lord of the Worlds. Every existence is deficient compared to His, but the angels are nearest to Him. By the attributes of the Creator we mean

knowledge, forbearance, generosity, mercy, being transcendent above [any attribution to Him of] iniquity, and suchlike. When man acquires these attributes, he comes closer to the angels. It is a correspondence of character and of attribute, not of spatial proximity; and it is in this sense that the angels are near their Lord.

They say, then, that the highest aspiration of humanity is to resemble the angels. For them, the angels are the souls that move the heavens, whose perfections are divided between the potential and the actual. Those perfections that are actual have a spherical shape, always present in actuality, while their potential perfections determine their spatial position. They move toward whatever position is possible for them—though some positions are not possible because of their lack of stability there—and keep on seeking one position after another. Their intent is no more than to be like their Creator by acquiring His attributes of perfection. They move to radiate generosity upon the worlds that lie below them, for they do not break from their regular angles of ascent and passage through the sky. Now, there is no proof for any of this, for it would make no difference if the eastward motion were westward, or vice versa.

As for their proof that Heaven is alive, they claim that it is in motion, which is observable fact, and that every moving body must have a mover. This is another premise, for if a body could move on its own simply by being a body, then all bodies would be in motion. The mover of Heaven must therefore be a natural force, such as the force that makes a stone fall downwards; or else an external force like throwing a stone upwards, compelling it to rise; or else it must move of its own volition. It cannot be a compelling force, since this would mean either that another body moved it, in which case the same argument would apply to that body, or else that God Himself moves it without an intermediary. For them the latter is impossible, because if He moved Heaven simply by virtue of being its Creator, He would move every other

body as well; there must be some reason why He singled it out to move. Nor can it be said that He moved it with His will, for His will has a singular relationship with all bodies, so why did He single out some for motion and not others? Nor it is possible that they are moved by nature, since nature moves things in a single direction, not in a circle; if something is pushed away, it does not come back, as if spatiality were of no account.

Now, we could admit all of these claims, except of course their assertion that Heaven could not move by the will of God, for that applies to the shape of Heaven and its motion between points, and the question of why it was given that particular form.

(ii) They say that if it is established that Heaven moves by its own volition, this means that it must possess knowledge of the particulars of the world. They say that the meaning of the Preserved Tablet is the souls of the heavens, and that all particular information is inscribed upon them just as information is inscribed in the intellectual faculty in man. The heavenly angels, they say, are the souls of the heavens, while the cherubim elect are the incorporeal intellects, which are independent substances not confined by space or delimited by bodies. Their argument for Heaven's knowledge of particulars is that their rotary motion is volitional, and volition follows its object; and the universal will does not turn towards the universal object, nor does anything precede from it. Everything that emerges into actuality is a particular existent, and the relationship between the Universal Will and the particulars is unmediated, meaning that nothing particular can issue from it. Therefore, there must be a particular will that designates a given motion, and this will must envisage that particular motion by means of a corporeal power, since volition must envisage its object. If it is established that Heaven envisages the particulars, it follows that it must have knowledge of its differing relationships with earth due to the differences among its parts with respect to rising, setting, and the

zenith. The motions that bring about cause and effect constitute a chain that links back to the volitional motion of Heaven; the only reason that man is unaware of what the future holds is that he is ignorant of these causes.

Now, all of this is false as far as Heaven is concerned, since it implies an infinite regression of temporal events, which is impossible. However, it is true when it comes to the description of the Glorious Creator, inasmuch as all information is instantaneously His, subject to His will and knowledge. Yet this does not necessitate that He have a particular shape or rotary motion; indeed, anything that must have such a shape or motion requires a willing entity to make it so, whose will is first of all knowledge. It is impossible that Creator and creation could be equal in knowledge. If the sphere knew all of the effects of motion to an infinite extent, and the Glorious Creator knew the same, their knowledge would have to be either in harmony or contradictory. Either way, that would imply a deficiency in the One Who must be absolutely perfect; and even the philosophers agree that this quality is that of the Glorious Creator alone.

(iii) We saw in the previous two sections that some of their claims are false and untenable, while others are tenable, such as our knowledge that the heavens are in motion, and that the celestial bodies have differing motions with regard to their times and places of rising and setting, and as to how certain events are occasioned by this. However, we hold that all this is subordinate to the will and knowledge of the Glorious Creator in every instant of time, whereas they claim that Heaven and the souls of the spheres exercise independent will and knowledge in this regard. We must therefore divide this section into three further subdivisions. The first is to establish that God Most High has knowledge of particulars; the second is to establish that He wills all beings; and the third is the chief subject of the section, namely the hierarchy of motion.

God Most High Has Knowledge of Particulars

Those who believe in the Creator agree that God Most High possesses knowledge, but they disagree as to what exactly He knows, and whether or not His knowledge is something apart from His Essence. The agreement that He possesses knowledge in any sense is sufficient for our purposes, and we may further clarify it by saying that the world must either have a creator or have no creator. The claim that it has no creator was proven false above. If it does have a creator, it must be that He created it either while having knowledge of it or while having no knowledge of it. If it be said that He created it without having knowledge of it, this would mean that either He was compelled to do it, or He did it absent-mindedly. Either is false and impossible, as we have seen. Therefore, the only conclusion is that He created it knowingly.

They might say, "He has knowledge only of universals, but not of particulars, since that would imply the renewal of His knowledge whenever a new thing arose, which is impossible." But this is fallacious, since it could apply universally as well as particularly: if a mustard seed could be created without His knowledge, then Heaven too could have been created without His knowledge.

They might say, "We admit that a creator cannot create without knowledge of what he creates. But in this case, it is the angels who are assigned to this, and they have independent knowledge of the particulars." That is the essence of their argument, but it is false, because their conception of the Glorious Creator is that He is pure intellect, and it is necessary that pure intellect, divested of matter, not be ignorant of anything. The only reason why man is ignorant is that he dwells in matter and is distracted by it from other things. We would ask them: "You know that Heaven has knowledge of particulars, but why do you not attribute this to the Lord Almighty in the same manner as you do to Heaven?" If they

say that that would entail that temporal incidents could be new to Him, we would reply that it does not imply that at all, because He has known from eternity everything that will ever occur—all of the world's compositions and transformations to the very end. Their own principle is that He knows the first causes, which necessitates that He must know their effects, and the effects of those effects, and so on; for to know the cause is to know the effect, and every cause has an effect, and so on until the end of the chain. The incidences and changes that befall temporal things all run in accordance with His knowledge, which is one and unchanging. It is they that change, and He has always known that they would, for He knew how each would impact the other.

They might ask, "Is His knowledge something extraneous to His Essence, or are they one and the same?"

Our answer is that the Mu'tazilites say that His Essence is one with His knowledge, while the Ash'arites and most other groups say that His knowledge is something other than His Essence. What I believe is that God, Incomparably Perfect is He, is Knowing, and that His knowledge is already proven. That is one premise; the second premise, if it is established, is that it is untenable to assert that His knowledge is something other than His Essence. This is established by saying that Knowledge must either be one with the Essence, which we do not believe, or that it is something other than it, which is what they believe. If it is something other than it, it must either be independent of the Essence by being necessarily existent, or else the Essence must be a requirement for its existence. If it is independent of the Essence and is eternal and self-subsisting, then we have two gods: the Essence, and the Knowledge, which is impossible. If we say that the Essence is a requirement for its existence, then it must either be eternal or temporal. If it is eternal, then one eternal thing cannot be required for another eternal thing to exist. If it is temporal, then it must either subsist in the Essence

of God Most High, or otherwise. If it subsists in Him, this would mean that temporal things can subsist in His Essence, which is impossible. If it subsists in something else, then it cannot be an attribute of His Essence.

One might object that this is no more than what the Mu'tazilites believe. However, I say that we differ from them in an important detail, which is that our position is that God Most High knows all universals and particulars, and it cannot be said that His knowledge is His Essence, nor that it is other than it. This is because to affirm an additional name for the Creator in an absolute sense is the exclusive preserve of Revelation, and there is no pronouncement in Revelation saying that knowledge is something extraneous to Him; rather, it is used of Him in an absolute sense. Rational proofs also testify that God Most High is Knowing, and that knowledge cannot be a self-subsisting eternal being independent of God, nor an eternal being that requires something else in order to exist.

God Wills All Beings

This section concerns the divine Will, which is a difficult concept upon which those who deny the divine Attributes base their arguments. We must therefore discuss it in detail, God willing.

First, the accepted definition of will is the soul's resolve upon a given action when the instigating faculty prompts it after being stirred in that direction in the imaginal faculty by something that is desirable, or something that must be avoided. Now this notion is entirely impossible for God Most High. The divine Will refers to His bringing about an act without being inattentive of it; His intent in bringing a certain thing into existence, and His resolving upon it, is called Will. The true meaning of this is the emergence of the act from potentiality into actuality. It has been proven above that God is Knowing, that He created the world, and that the

world is entirely dependent on Him. Everyone agrees with this; even if they call Him "Cause" rather than God, they acknowledge that the world could not exist without Him. His knowledge of the world and of all that there is to be known, past and future, instantaneously and without change, ignorance, or inattentiveness, has been established above. When knowledge is attributed to Him, it is eternally before the act and also eternally after it.

Now, when the knowledge of something that will come to pass is directed towards the objects of knowledge, those objects are divided in His case into that which shall be and that which has been. Everything that will be is potential, and everything that has been has already emerged from potentiality into actuality. It is the state of the object that has changed, not the knowledge itself.

This is a vital principle which must be understood at this level. What it means is that if a potential thing will occur, God Most High wills for it to occur and has arranged the means in accordance with His knowledge, so that it conforms to what was always known. The meaning of "will" in this context is that every willed thing is known. This may be presented by the following premises: everything that is willed is known; everything that is known unfolds according to what God wills; everything that is willed unfolds according to what God knows. If knowledge is the cause of what is willed in potentiality, then what emerges into actuality must follow what it was in potentiality; this is obvious. The occurrence of a thing when it emerges into actuality is the sign that God has brought it about; and His bringing it about is the object of His Will, which follows His knowledge.

If it be asked whether the objects of knowledge are finite or infinite, our answer is that this question requires elaboration. The questioner is already implying that the objects of knowledge are finite, since it is intellectually obvious that an object of knowledge must be encompassed, and everything that is encompassed

is limited, and everything that is limited is finite. Therefore, every object of knowledge must be finite, whether it is potential or has emerged into actuality. The entire world, from the ninth sphere to everything it contains, and all of its subordinates in all their types, classes, and members, and all that they necessitate, must be finite and encompassed by the knowledge of God.

You might say, "That is admitted, but the question was whether or not God Most High has knowledge of that which is infinite." Now, that question is nonsensical from this point of view, because every object of knowledge is finite, and therefore the question is essentially saying, "Is every finite thing finite, or not?"—which is meaningless.

You may say, "Then can it be said that His knowledge could contain an infinite number of objects?" Our answer is that knowledge cannot be called knowledge unless it is attributed to a given object, for otherwise it would lose its distinctive nature. As long as it is attributed to something, its object is finite. One final perspective remains, which is that the eternal divine knowledge is attached to a succession of objects which are in themselves finite; but it would be false to attribute this finitude to the knowledge of God Most High, since knowledge is neither finite nor infinite. That is the root of the error. Someone who does not comprehend the truth might suppose that as long as the objects of knowledge are finite, God's knowledge must be finite too, but that is far from the truth; *They esteem not God as He ought to be esteemed* (Qur'ān 22:74). It is the objects that are finite, inasmuch as they are capable of being described so. Most theologians even say that modalities cannot be called finite or infinite, let alone the Creator's knowledge, Exalted is He! His knowledge is neither accident nor substance. Regardless of the viewpoint from which you investigate this whole question, the finitude must be attributed to the objects, not to the knowledge;

and this does not detract from the worth of God Most High in the slightest, nor does it mean that He is less than all-powerful.

The Hierarchy of Motion

No insightful person who understands the foregoing will be unaware that the world requires a Creator, and that this Creator must have knowledge; for the objects of knowledge cannot be separated from it, and no atom moves or falls still without being recorded in the knowledge of the Creator in a record: *My Lord errs not, nor does He forget* (Qur'ān 20:52). Every movement, every contraction and expansion, every whisper and murmur, is known to the Creator now just as He knew it before time began, and just as He will always know it after it comes to pass. How could it be otherwise, when we have seen that even most of those who profess to have wisdom and knowledge of God, the Mighty and Majestic, argue that the celestial sphere has knowledge of the particulars of the world, and acknowledge that the sphere is under the power of a Knowing Director and intentionally moves to draw nearer to Him? Who better deserves to be called perfect: the master, or the slave? Glory be to the Lord of the Glorious Throne and the Powerful Onslaught! *Not a word does he utter but there is a watcher ready beside him* (Qur'ān 50:18). He is nearer to His servant than his own jugular vein: *No secret conversation takes place among three but He is their fourth, nor among five but He is their sixth, nor fewer than that, nor more, but He is with them wherever they may be. Then on the Day of Resurrection He will inform them of what they have done. Truly God knows all things* (Qur'ān 58:7). *With Him are the keys of the Unseen; none knows them but He. He knows what is on land and at sea. No leaf falls without His knowledge, and there is not a grain in the shadows of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry, but that it is in a manifest*

Book (Qur'ān 6:59). This verse is one of those verses that constitute "the Mother of the Book,"ⁱ and in it God says that He possesses the keys of the Unseen.

Anyone who is convinced of the preceding will desire to know the meaning of His bearing these keys. The philosophers would have been guided to it, had they only attributed this to the Lord of Glory; all causes and effects are known to Him, and it could not be that He knew them at first and then ceased to know them after they came into existence, for that would mean that He underwent change. Nor could He know them in a universal sense first and then gain renewed knowledge of them upon their occurrence, for that also would be absurd. The truth is that God Most High knows of them before they exist, down to the minutest detail. If any detail could escape Him, He would not know them at all. If this is established, in the sense that everything ordained in His knowledge is ordained in existence, then it cannot be that any part of it escapes His knowledge.

If you would like an example to illustrate this, then consider bread. There cannot be bread unless there is dough, there cannot be dough unless there is flour, and there cannot be flour unless there is wheat; and this wheat must be ground, which means that there must be a millstone and something to move it, and the thing that moves it must have certain attributes. All of these are essential necessary means. You may understand the Glorious Creator and His causes in the same way. The causes are the keys, and the effects are the locks that they open. None but He may have charge of them. If anyone knows some of them, it is because he learned them; and the one who knows some cannot possibly know all, no matter who he is, even a Prophet or an angel brought nigh. God

i This expression signifies, in the present context, that its meaning is clear and unambiguous: see Qur'ān 3:3.

speaks of the *shadows* in this verse to symbolize the endless reach of His knowledge and how it encompasses even the most obscure things; and He speaks of the *fresh* and the *dry* because they imply also heat and cold, all of these states being among the things which He necessarily knows.

In His knowledge, the heavens and the earth and all that they contain—and He is beyond compare—are like a book in the hands of one of us, which he may peruse at will. Of course, the knowledge gleaned from reading a book is infinitely lesser than His knowledge, which encompasses all things and all particulars. That is merely a simile, since He utterly transcends the notions of limbs, implements, and manipulation. His Majesty is such that things react to Him by His mere desire that they exist. Despite this, He decreed in His knowledge and wisdom that the world be ordered and arranged in a certain way, so that things link together. This is something intuitively obvious to us which no one denies or questions, and there is no reason why it should not be possible. The only thing that is impossible is that anything could exist in His domain against His will, or that anything but He could bring something into existence, or that anything could occur in His domain without His knowledge—glory be to Him above any such notions!

If you understand all this, you will know that motion begins with Him, as you have seen the proof that the entire world functions and is ordered according to His prior decree, and that His knowledge never changes. You will also know that the world reacts to Him, and that He does not do this by manipulation, for He is not a measured body, nor an accident or a substance. The world reacts to Him, and it must necessarily do so; and it is He who chooses. Iron is magnetic because of a special property in it. That is on the level of the material world—so what do you imagine about the Lord of Glory, Majesty, and Perfection?

If you follow this, then know that motion is of three kinds: motion upon the center, such as the movement of the spheres; motion from the center, such as air and vapor that rises upwards; and motion toward the center, such as the motion of a stone when it falls to earth, naturally seeking the central point of it. Beyond that, this motion is of two kinds: compulsive, and voluntary. It also has two attributions: one to itself and the other to its Maker. When the action is attributed to the Maker, He is the One Who chooses it entirely, and none of it takes place without His direction, command, and decree. He ordains that it take place in a given direction, at a given time, in a given individual, whether this motion be immediate or delayed, potential or actual. This is obvious and necessarily true.

As for the other attribution of motion, to the moving body itself, it is divided into three categories: it may be [i] voluntary, which is something specific to living beings; or it may be compulsive, which may apply to either animate or inanimate beings and is either [ii] consequential or [iii] accidental.

Voluntary actions depend on the signals of the soul when it stirs into motion. The things that are subordinate to the soul obey it to the degree to which it obeys its Creator, Who made this a natural disposition in them. The soul reacts to the signals of the intellect, which reacts to its Creator. The souls of the angels differ, in that their voluntary motion is directly from their intellects, directly from their Creator, which is why they do not disobey Him at all; as He says, *They do not disobey God in what He commands them, but do as they are commanded* (Qur'ān 66:6). They always act in accordance with the knowledge of their Glorious Creator, and in conformity with what He approves. Other living beings are composed of matter; and because they are tethered to their bodies and are not free of matter, their souls have two sides: one facing the Sublime Assembly and the other facing the lower world. What this

means is that there is a common division within the soul, and it is commanded to observe two directions. It observes the direction of the angels by emulating their virtues and striving to be as devoted as they are to the worship of God Most High, which is one of the two sides it is commanded to honor. The other side is the lower side, that being its connection to the body, which is composed of natural materials. The soul is eager to see to its welfare and to govern it, like a king who wishes to see his kingdom thrive, to protect its borders, to look after its citizens, to preserve its lands, to confront its enemies, to bring benefit to it, and to ward off harm from it.

The soul therefore stands perplexed, pulled between these two sides, both claiming their rights from it and requiring it to give them justice and lead them along the divine path of equilibrium. God Most High created them in that manner and arrangement, and therefore the divine wisdom privileged man by providing him with the necessary instruments for mastering both sides. For the higher side He assisted him with the intellect, allowing him to receive from God's angels and Messengers and to understand the will of his Creator. His situation with respect to the soul is like a man who receives orders from a king whose commands must be obeyed and whose punishments are feared. The king orders the man to defend the frontier, gather supplies, and fight enemies, and to carry out his will even though he is far from him. Then he says, "I have equipped you with three things which will be of help to you, so you will have no room to excuse yourself to me later. First, I am sending you to a frontier which I have enhanced with palaces, houses, fortresses, walls, rivers, trees, fruits, and countless other useful things.

"Second, I assign to you slaves, assistants, and servants. I have made it their nature to respond to you, and so no matter what you command them to do, it will be done as you wish, whether it be right or wrong. They will not question your desire or disobey

your command. You must use them well. Do not be deluded by the power I have given you, for I can be very stern, despite my forbearance.

"Third, I assign to you a wise learned minister, who is well-informed of the affairs of the world, and who knows which roads to follow and how best to follow them, and is able to look ahead to the consequences of things. I have given him the standing of a minister to me, and now I honor you by making him your minister. Beware of issuing a command without his counsel. Do not be deluded by my having made the slaves naturally obedient to you, or by the powers I have granted you. The one who seeks counsel will not be cheated. This minister constantly receives guidance from me, and this is evident to you in the fact that he never disobeys me for even the blink of an eye."

So, the man finds himself at the frontier with those three things. The man is like the soul, the frontier like the body. The supplies and hosts are like the natural endowments and faculties of the body, as we described in the First Ascension. The accouterments and attendants of the frontier are like the processes of the body for nutrition and other useful matters. The minister is like the intellect, and the king is like the Glorious Creator, though He is beyond compare.

If you understand this, then know that the soul is the instigator of the faculties in the body, as we have seen, and that God Most High made the inner senses and outer limbs naturally subservient to it, so that when it stirs them in a given direction, they naturally move toward it, as long as there is nothing to impede this. From the perspective of the parts which acted upon, this motion is compulsive. From the perspective of the soul and its instigation of the act, and the question of whether its motion is voluntary or compulsive, we say that this is an obscure subject that is beyond the reach of most people due to its great profundity and subtlety.

It is known as the question of fate, and debate about it has raged since the creation of Adam ﷺ. Our weak constitutions, our failure to follow the guidance of our intellects, our preoccupation with worldly trivialities and charlatanry—all these ought to deny us the right to broach this subject; for there is something to say about every station, but only some may walk that road. Nevertheless, we shall delve into it—timidly like fearful strangers, not brazenly like bold explorers.

As we saw earlier, motion is divided into different categories, and human motion must either be compulsive or voluntary. Compulsive action is natural and necessary; we shall have something to say about this later, God willing. No one disagrees that it is not the domain of reward and punishment. It is a desire which prompts voluntary action that is subject to accountability. It is vital to understand the example we presented earlier, for we did so in order to prepare the ground for this subject. We said that the soul has two sides, which we likened to the minister and the frontier. The higher side is that of the minister, the lower baser side that of the frontier. When the soul stirs in the direction of virtues, it is receiving from the intellect, and the intellect from its Creator. It is rewarded for this stirring and this instigation of motion towards the desire of its Lord. The resulting actions occur by the act of God Most High and the stirring of the soul; that is, when the desire is aroused as the soul gives ear to the intellect. The meaning of the defense of the frontier is the employment of knowledge by cleansing its locus, for it will only visit a locus that is able to receive it after the impediments are swept from it under the direction of the intellect. This direction is rewarded inasmuch as it is an intermediary for the reaction of the body. We have said often that the world is divided into active incorporeal intellects, which are noble, and dense bodies, which are base; the latter are objects of action, while the intellects are subjects. And since incorporeal intellects are unable

to manipulate directly, and are on the opposing side of bodies just as knowledge is on the opposing side of ignorance, which is an absolute opposition, the divine wisdom decreed that their influence be manifested by degrees. Therefore, they were made into a soul, a compound that resembles the intellect in one way and the body in another. This is ultimately a matter of correspondence, and the correspondence comes down to two aspects: to the lower side in the form of vices, and to the higher side in the form of virtues. The soul is suspended between the two. Bodies are acted upon by souls, souls by intellects, and intellects by the Glorious Creator.

The first initiator is God, and the command issues from Him like a command from the king to the vizier, then from the vizier to the chamberlain, then to the one who will be punished or honored; but God is beyond compare. The Glorious Lord is the initiator. When good deeds emerge into the domain of action, they are from God, as all agree. They come from God, and the soul is rewarded for them as an intermediary, an instrument. This is akin to how the religion honors the bodies of the dead with washing, shrouding, embalming, and burial, and forbids that they be dishonored or burned. The bodies do nothing to earn this, but the grace of God is limitless and beyond all reckoning. If God only rewarded when it was truly deserved, He would not be called generous, but only just. The just man rewards a good deed in kind, while the generous man gives without first receiving. God Most High honors dead bodies in this manner because they were instruments for good deeds, though all people agree that in reality it was the spirits who performed those deeds.

The same is true of the soul with respect to the intellect. The Glorious Creator honors it as the intermediary even though in reality it has no deeds of its own, for it is the intellect that guides, inspires, and instigates its motion. Someone honored by the royal court may express thanks to the chamberlain, but it is the vizier

who deserves the thanks, since the order was conveyed from him. Understand, then, that the intellect is given thanks for its own role as mediator, but in reality, all thanks and praise truly belong to God, always and forever, for He was the initiator. Were it not for His grace, the intellect would never have been stable, for it is His subject. The absolutely Kind and perfectly Generous is none but God, the Lord of the Worlds.

No intelligent person doubts that virtues are from God. Evil is the point of disagreement among them. The Mu'tazilites say that evil is not from God; but since they saw that actions must have causes, they attributed the act to the human being, and made him its sole agent.

You might object, "The problem still remains: consider an action such as ritual prayer. If it is the act of the person, then the Creator plays no part in it. If it is the act of God, then the person plays no part in it. The act cannot be shared between them, as the Ash'arites claim."

Our response is that motions are attributed to bodies, and so that division is unwarranted. The soul does not move on its own, but only guides and directs. The body reacts to it as iron reacts to a magnetic field. One does not say that when the iron moves, the magnetism indwells in it and makes its action manifest; rather, it acts upon it because of a property within it. Their objection is therefore invalid.

You might say, "If it is invalid from the standpoint of motion, the soul still possesses will, and the question about will remains unanswered."

Our response is that the will to do good follows knowledge. We have said that the soul is subordinate to the intellect, and that motion instigated by the intellect is purely good, since it is moved by the Glorious Creator. I do not mean corporeal motion, but instigating desire, which here means the soul's devotion and attention

to the higher side. Ultimately this means abstention from the lower side; and abstention is not an action but rather the absence of action. There are two things, then: instigating desire, which is the act of God Most High; and abstention from the opposite on the lower side. Abstention is inaction, not action.

You might say, "But is this abstention voluntary, or compelled by God? The question is a vital one."

Our response is that it is voluntary in one aspect and a matter of compulsion in another. To understand this, you must reacquaint yourself with what was said previously, which is that although the soul has power over the lower world, it exercises this power through the instrument of the power, wherein its actions manifest in ten places, as we described earlier. These include the five senses—smell, taste, touch, hearing, and sight—which are causes and means of the five internal senses: the faculties of imagination, retention, memory and so on. These faculties are like the informants in the city who convey information to the servants and inner members of the court such as the secretaries, chamberlains, and ministers. The informants convey their findings to the secretaries, and what they record is conveyed to the king, who is the soul. The five senses play differing roles: the sense of sight is assigned to the domain of colors, with their differing attributes and measures; the sense of taste is assigned to all that can be consumed; and so on. All the information they gather is transcribed and stored by the secretaries.

The body, as we have said, is like a frontier region, and the soul is concerned with keeping its frontier secure with each passing moment. These sense perceptions are therefore necessary and compulsory for the soul; that is to say, it is in the soul's nature to pay heed to them. When your sight falls upon an object, you necessarily see that object, whether you desire to or not. The same is true of the other senses, and we need not list them at length. The soul's ability to see has simply been assigned to it. It is clear, therefore,

that the actions of the lower corporeal side are purely corporeal, and all purely corporeal actions are compulsory and natural. This aspect of the discussion is settled, and we are done with this side. We have established that actions are carried out, once their means are fulfilled, by the will of the soul. Its will is the distinguishing point between the two sides, the higher and the lower, and it has been made responsible for the governance of the higher side in a particular way, which has two aspects in relation to each side: compulsive, and voluntary. If it utilizes the cause, the effect will be achieved necessarily. If the effect is achieved by compulsion, whether regarding the higher or the lower side, it is not rewarded. With this we have finished with this aspect, namely the aspect of compulsion; but the aspect of volition still remains.

On the lower side, we said that the matter depends on the desire and will of the soul. The same is true of the higher side, and so the discussion must focus on this point, namely desire and will. We said that sometimes it is compulsive, other times purely voluntary. There is no definitive sign to establish this; rather, good comes to the soul from the direction of the intellect, and good action is the soul's reaction to the intellect's direction. It is rewarded for its desire, and its desire manifests in its influence upon the body, since in itself it manifests as no more than yearning and passion. It is rewarded for its role as an intermediary, as we saw earlier.

As for evil, it comes to the soul from the direction of goodness, so that first it is good, but then it is perverted. For example, suppose that you ride off on an errand on a horse you borrowed from a man's house. The horse is unruly and difficult to handle, but you take it on a route that goes directly past its owner's house. It naturally desires to go in. You pull on its reins, but it resists you, so you punish it with your whip and cause it pain until you have gained control of it. But you are at fault, because you should not have attempted to walk it past its owner's house. If you had gone

further and let it walk all the way to the door of the house and then tried to turn it around, it would not have obeyed you at all no matter what you did. It would have gone inside regardless, and you might have been injured. Intelligent people would look down upon you, because you allowed it to indulge in its nature and then tried to prevent it afterwards. God Most High has written in His eternal decree that things will act in accordance with their nature. If fire is allowed near cotton, it will inevitably burn it. The animal faculties that react to nature head naturally toward their center, and the passionate animal spirit inclines by nature and constitution toward its one element, just as a stone falls downwards. If the soul gives free rein to its informants in the beginning, that will become innate in them, for that is a necessary consequence that God Most High has created. The reason why the soul is punished is that it did not restrain its spies to begin with. This is why we tell a man that the first inadvertent glance he takes at a woman in the street is permitted him, for it occurs by compulsion and so he is not held to account for it. But he must beware the second glance, for once the eye is shown a beautiful image it will become naturally inclined towards it, and that is simply a necessary consequence. The soul will not be punished for the first glance, but if it continues to ignore the intellect's instruction to cease, it will be punished. When the informants continue to convey such perceptions to the inner faculties, the soul will become accustomed to them. This is why it is commanded to adhere to the higher side. Yet the entire affair belongs to God Most High, for He is the Maker of all deeds and the Creator of the first causes, and the effects are His acts. There is no avoiding this, and that is the most that can be said about this matter.

A hadith relates that Moses argued with Adam, saying, "Were you the one who brought mankind out of Paradise?" He replied, "Would you blame me for something that was destined for me before

I was created?" Adam ﷺ won the argument, as the Messenger of God ﷺ attested (Bukhārī 3409). The Ash'arites, Mu'tazilites, and Jabaritesⁱ argued about corporeal actions, while we have spoken of instigating desire and made it the cause of action. The Jabarites agree with us with regard to corporeal actions. That is the most that can be said of human beings among the animals.

As for dumb animals, their motions are assigned entirely to the lower side, where they remain, without any knowledge of the higher side. How can you deny this, when you see that even many human beings, such as those in Black Africa as well as elsewhere, do not seem to be different from the animals, inasmuch as they do not know of the angels or their Creator but worship fruits and trees? As God says: *They are like cattle; nay, they are further astray* (Qur'ān 25:44). The instigator of motion in animals is what the senses convey to the imaginative faculty, which for them functions like the intellect. An animal acts in accordance with the protocols of the imaginative faculty, so that it is able to recognize threats and benefits and act accordingly. It may well be that animals also possess a retentive faculty where images are retained.

As for the higher realms, the hierarchy of their motion is known only to God Most High; He knows how they began, while we know only what we have gleaned from repeated observation, or from the intellect's reasonable assumptions. For example, our bodies grow by nourishment, and this nourishment comes from plants, which are made of water and earth acted upon by air and fire, which are like agents interacting with water and earth in the sense that they produce an influence upon them. Slaughtering is done by a knife, but if you left the sheep alone with the knife, the knife would never carry out the act; there must be a correlative

i Or Necessitarians, meaning those who deny the existence of any human free will.

cause. Fire and air mix with the rays of the celestial bodies, mingling in the atmosphere of the sphere of the moon, which orbits the earth as the aura orbits the moon. These rays then move with motions that conform to them from the seven celestial bodies. The philosophers claim that these bodies are alive, that they are to the lower world as we are to our bodies, and that they too experience voluntary and compulsive action. This is an innovative theory which we cannot refute, since there is nothing in the Qur'ān, the Sunna, or the Islamic consensus to condemn it. Those who deny it do so arbitrarily, not with demonstrative proof. We may allow that it is possible, because our position is that the Glorious Creator is the absolute Agent, the Cause of all causes, and the One Who assigns their effects. It therefore makes no difference to us whether the celestial bodies are alive or not, for if they are alive, the most that could be said is that they are like us; and we do not deny our own existence or the power we are able to exert in our domain. It would simply be willful and ludicrous to dispute this.

Let us say something to put this in perspective. Someone might claim that the angels are visible, though all appearances suggest that they are not. We say that there are three levels of existence. Firstly, there are things that are intelligible, existing without being seen; these are the intellects, which are apprehended by other intellects, not by the senses. Secondly there are souls, which are also apprehended by the intellect and cannot be seen. Thirdly there are things that can be apprehended by the intellect and by the senses, but cannot apprehend themselves or others. What we see in the heavens are the bodies of souls and intellects. The true being of an angel is its soul, not its body, just as the true being of a man is his soul, though only his body is visible. We cannot apprehend his soul; not even the intellect can apprehend the true nature of his soul, much less the external senses.

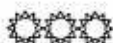
Therefore, we must speak about these visible bodies, and say that the cause of the reactions of air, fire, and all that is beneath the sphere of the moon is connected to the revolutions and orbits of the ninth sphere, which is divided into twelve constellations. The planets are distributed among them, some having one domicile, others two. These bodies all have their own differing natures, giving rise to heat, cold, moisture, and dryness. All these natures are intermediaries for reactions as the planets pass through the constellations, and differing motions as they pass through their degrees, centers, and different rising-places. Thus, you might say, "When the sun and moon are in positions of moisture, there will be heavy rain." The details of this fall within the scope of the science of astronomy, and this is not the place to discuss them, but only to note them in passing.

The root of all of this is the eastern movement, from the east to the west. We saw earlier what the philosophers say about the cause of this, and how they categorize souls and intellects; and we refuted what they say about the Creator also being the cause from which all this necessarily follows. When we refute these assertions of theirs, what we are refuting is their claim that this is *definitely* the way things are; for such a thing is certainly possible, provided it is framed according to our conception of total divine oneness. We believe that God Most High is One, the oneness being pure and absolute, and that He is the Sustainer of the world, such that the world could not conceivably exist without Him; and we believe in all that the Messengers conveyed. These circular motions give rise to other motions in a harmonious manner. We discussed this earlier in depth, and there is no need to repeat it.

You might say, "Why do you deny the belief that these manifest lights are active, knowing, or alive? After all, God says, *God is the Light of the heavens and the earth* (Qur'ān 24:35). Perhaps the

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Magians would say that this light is a god." Let us move on to the Fourth Ascension in order to answer this, God willing.





FOURTH ASCENSION

Know, dear brother, that God Most High is the Light of the heavens and the earth. But we do not believe that He is light in the sense that He is a visible ray that can be seen shining upon a wall, for His Light is of a different order. "Light" can mean six different things.

Firstly, there is the perceptible light that requires its element and does not endure, for it is a short-lived accident that requires the matter of its element. This is the light of fire.

The second type is nobler than the first, though it also requires an element, for it is ennobled by its attribution and its identity. This is the light of vision, which perceives shapes, colors, and other objects.

The third is a noble light in the higher world, also ennobled by its identity and by what is attributed to it, and nobler than the light of vision. This is sunlight, which is the cause of the existence of the elements and the existence of fire and bodies endowed with vision, while itself not consisting of compounded matter—which is why the Magians worship it.

The fourth is also a noble light, a purely self-subsisting light that perceives things as they truly are and perceives their consequences. This is the intellect and the soul. These things are divided into that which facilitates perception and also perceives itself, which is the intellect, which is a true light; and that which facilitates perception but does not perceive itself, such as fire, vision, and the sun.

The Qur'ān is called "light", which is the fifth kind, and the Messenger is also called "light"; but in this case the light is metaphorical, a borrowing of the meaning of luminosity. It is in this sense that knowledge is also called light.

The sixth is absolute Light, which is the Glorious Creator. The meaning of this is more spiritual than that of the intellect, for in the case of the intellect the luminosity refers to the intellect's ability to discern the true nature of things. It is in this sense that the Glorious Creator is called the Real, the Clear, the Knower of all secrets.

These, then, are six lights: metaphorical in the case of the Qur'ān and the Messenger ﷺ, literal in the case of the Glorious Creator, and figurative in all other cases.

You might ask what is the meaning of God's Words, *The likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass, the glass is as a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the east nor of the west. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, though no fire touched it* (Qur'ān 24:35). Our answer is that this means the intellectual light. We have here four things: the niche, the glass, the lamp, and the olive tree. The niche represents the soul, the glass the imaginative faculty, the lamp the intellect, and the olive the tree of the active intellect. And in order for the lamp, which is light, to make its fruit and wisdom manifest to bodies, it must have a corporeal instrument that resembles those bodies, just as light requires oil, which shares fire's property of heat and the wick's property of moisture. We have said many times that the intellect cannot manipulate things directly, and that its mediator is the soul. This is the niche.

Then the soul must have a means of recognizing the objects of the senses, as we have seen, and therefore the divine wisdom endowed it with faculties. These include the imaginative faculty, in which the perceptions of the senses are depicted. Its symbol

here is the glass, because objects of vision are reflected in it like a polished mirror, and because glass is the most limpid substance and is wholly transparent. The Prophets ﷺ know the Unseen by means of this faculty, and they are able to express the image and make sense of it. There is a science exclusive to their domain, namely the science of dream interpretation, which is accessible only through the properties of this faculty.

The tree is the active intellect, in the sense that things react to it. And since many lamps can be kindled from a single lamp, the Almighty did not say "grown," for growth implies subtraction from the origin, but instead said *kindled*, implying that nothing is subtracted from the tree and that this is no ordinary tree, since one cannot kindle a fire from an ordinary tree. He made it an olive tree in particular because it is evergreen and provides constant and plentiful benefit, and has many leaves and branches. And though it is an olive, it emits fire that provides light. A full examination of this symbolism would take too long here. I have provided one in my book *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Niche of Lights).

As for the fire, it represents the divine Lights. Another possible interpretation is that the tree is the Messenger ﷺ, and the fire is the angel.

You might object that the Sufis have offered a great many differing interpretations of this subject with regard to the true meaning of the luminous affinity represented by the lamp, niche, glass, tree, and fire. Here we have said that the niche represents the soul, the glass the imaginative faculty, the lamp the particular intellect, the tree the Universal Intellect, and the fire the divine light and its radiance. None of these can be called dense or corporeal. God Most High further describes this by saying, *Light upon light!* If there is any affinity and resemblance between these things, then it must pertain to the soul's purity and removal from pollutants.

Yet this implies, [one might object], that [the Sufis] believe in some kind of indwelling (*ḥulūl*). A poet said of this:

The glass is transparent, and so is the wine;
They both seem alike, and confusion results.
It's as if there were wine there, and no glass—
Or there were a glass there, and no wine!

Our response is that the doctrine of indwelling is pure error and manifest nonsense.

You might object, "But the Sufis are notorious for it. One of them said, 'I am the Real,' and another said, 'Glory be to me! Within this robe is none other than God!'"

Our response is that once we have established the falsehood of indwelling, we shall see what the Sufis actually believe. Now, the true meaning of indwelling is for one thing to share the location of another, be it one substance with another, one body with another, or an accident with a substance. We have established by demonstration that intellects and souls are self-subsisting, and that they are not borne by anything, nor do they bear anything. There is no need to repeat that here; and it is all the more true of the Lord of Glory.

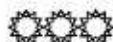
You might say, "Then everything returns back to God, and the Glorious Creator never parts from intellects and souls except by differentiation, since they are alike in their substantiality and the true meaning of life and self-subsistence."

Our reply is that we do not say the same of the Glorious Creator as we do of the soul. The soul is not independent of God; and we have demonstrated that it is created, which means it cannot be Him. That would mean that all things in existence are gods, which

i From a poem by Ṣāḥib ibn 'Abbād (d. 385/995).

is absurd. Nor could He dwell in souls or be blended with them like wine with milk, as the Christians claim about Christ, for those are the attributes of bodies. Therefore, the true meaning of this can only refer to reaction, and to God's bringing it into existence in actuality. That is to say, all signals and motions depend upon Him, for He is the Mover, the Contractor, the Expander. Souls are to Him as iron is to magnetism—although God is beyond compare, and there is no mediator between them, as we have seen.

So it was that some Sufis who realized the truth and saw how all things depend on Him, and cannot exist without Him, said such things as "Within this robe is none other than God," which in reality is an emphatic affirmation of the divine oneness, or "Glory be to me," which is a way of avoiding attribution, for duality is a kind of idolatry. The mention of attributes can imply nothing other than differentiation: when we say, "Glory be to the Generous," we negate stinginess; when we say, "Glory be to God," we negate God having any partners. Yet only the one who conceives of partners has the need to negate them. Some of [those Sufis] reached such an awareness of the divine Oneness that it would have been discourteous of them to conceal it. But when an utterance overwhelms a person and he cannot help but speak it, there is no way to avoid it. Certainly, more outrageous things have been said, such as the philosophers claiming that it is not right to say that the Glorious Creator "exists," since that would put Him on the level of other existent things and within their class. Ultimately that is meaningless and trivial.





FIFTH ASCENSION

This Ascension pertains to the meaning of Prophethood and the Prophet. Mankind is divided into three groups in this regard. There are those who deny it, and then two groups among those who affirm it. Firstly, there are those who claim that it is a birthright, and that the soul of a Prophet is endowed from birth with a power to which things react, destining him for a virtuous and goodly life. This is the position of the philosophers.

Secondly, there are those who believe that Prophethood is granted to a person for whom God Most High breaks natural law by displaying a miraculous phenomenon at his hands. They say that Prophethood has eight requirements: (1) that he live in a time when the communication of Revelation is possible; (2) that he perform a supernatural miracle; (3) that his teaching include a challenge; (4) that his conduct mirror his teaching; (5) that his words attach to the heart; (6) that it not be obvious in his face that he is lying; (7) that his challenge be proven unanswerable; (8) that mankind be unable to resist him. A ninth requirement may be appended, which is that his miracle be of a sort that is familiar to the people of his time.

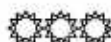
Revelation is conveyed to the Messenger either through the mediation of individual angels, who take the form of a perfect human being or some other image, or without any mediator by God Most High inscribing it directly upon his imaginative faculty. God Most High says, *And it is not for any human that God should speak*

to him save by Revelation, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave (Qur'ān 42:51). *Revelation* means what is transmitted to the imaginative faculty. It can also refer to inspiration; hence God says, *We revealed to the mother of Moses* (Qur'ān 28:7). *From behind a veil* refers to the mediation of an angel, who is the veil.

Our own Prophet ﷺ was vouchsafed miracles of the same order as the other Messengers were. These miracles may be divided into that which endures and that which is past. His past miracles included the cleaving of the moon, the shank of meat that spoke, the palm trunk that sobbed, his prayer for rain, water flowing from between his fingers, the multiplying of a small quantity of food, and others. His enduring miracles are the Qur'ān and his foretelling of future events, many of which we have seen come true already.

Prophethood cannot mean simply kingship, as telling of the Unseen is something different from mere political rule. Nor can it be sorcery, as a sorcerer's magic does not outlive him, but this religion has endured for five hundred years. Consider also the Qur'ān, which has proven all humanity to be incapable of matching it. He ﷺ was unlettered and raised among an unlettered, uneducated people, yet he produced this Qur'ān, which contains the knowledge of the first and the last. Anyone who doubts his ﷺ Prophethood ought to contemplate the sciences and then behold the Qur'ān and how it contains marvels of the sciences of divinity, logic, debate, rhetoric, and all the other things that mankind from first to last have amassed and given the name of science or philosophy. Consider the arguments it contains, composed of all manner of arguments, analogies, and syllogisms in their proper forms, as well as its spiritual teachings and how it establishes religious laws for the governance of mankind. Yet he was an orphan boy raised by his uncle, never educated by Quraysh or instructed in the sciences. And even if he had been, he would never have achieved such a

composition, to say nothing of the wondrous ideas it contains. All those who have attempted to match it have focused on its structure, though that is the least of its challenges, and the most they have managed to come up with are common insults. Had they attempted to produce a Qur'ān that encompasses all those marvels of knowledge as comprehensively as it does, they would never manage it until the end of time. They would be ashamed of their efforts. If anyone doubts that it is the work of God Himself, it can only be because He has sealed their heart; we seek His refuge from that! May God bless our master Muḥammad, His Prophet, through whom He guided us from the darkness of idolatry; and may He bless his Family and Companions, and all who love him, and grant them abundant peace.





SIXTH ASCENSION

The teachings that come from the Messenger ﷺ are of two kinds: instruction, and information. Instruction is of two kinds: commandment and prohibition. I have discussed commands and prohibitions, and the foundations and applications of religious laws, in *Risālat al-aqtāb* (The Treatise on the Poles).ⁱ As for information, it is divided into information about the past such as accounts of the religious communities of the past, and information about the future such as events to come and the details of the Hereafter. Everything stated in the Qur'ān or mass-transmitted from the Messenger ﷺ is certain and undoubtable truth. This is further divided into that which can be interpreted figuratively, and that which cannot be. If something can be interpreted, one who interprets it is excused; and if it cannot be, those who refrain from interpreting it will avoid straying into unbelief.

The difficulties reside in three questions: that of the soul, which we have already discussed; that of the physical Resurrection; and that of Paradise and Hell.

ISSUE: God says, *As We began the first creation, so shall We repeat it* (Qur'ān 21:104), which is definitive textual evidence of bodily restoration. He also says of [dead] bones, *He Who originated them the first time will give them life* (Qur'ān 36:79); and, *And*

ⁱ This treatise is mentioned in some lists of the author's works, including in al-Subkī's *Tabaqāt* and al-Zabīdī's *Ittiḥāf*, but it has apparently been lost.

God made you grow out of the earth, then He will send you back into it, and bring you forth again (Qur'ān 71:17-18). Indeed, the Qur'ān speaks more about the Resurrection than about any other topic, and these verses constitute definitive textual proof that souls will be returned to bodies. This is beyond debate, and those who deny it must doubt the truthfulness of the Messenger, if they do not disbelieve in him outright.

Two kinds of people deny it. First there are those who claim that the soul is not immortal, and that the world is an endless cycle of constant overwriting, following the revolutions of the spheres. Their viewpoint has already been refuted.

The second group are those proponents of Islam, mostly among the Sufis or philosophers, who claim that the soul is immortal, but the body will not be restored. Their argument is that the body is composed of transmuted nutrition that is consumed; that this nutrition is made up of vegetation and meat; that one individual might consume another such that a single body is composed of two bodies; and if that body were restored, it would be impossible for those consumed bodies to be restored as well. Or, if the consumed bodies were resurrected, the one that consumed them would no longer have a body to be resurrected. Yet this lengthy line of argument is entirely inapplicable. We respond to them that there is no reason to say that God Most High will restore the exact matter of those bodies; rather, He has affirmed that the souls will be restored to a new creation, such that they will appear to be the same as they originally were. A Tradition states that God will send down rain, which will be the source of the recreation of the bodies; and He is well able to create whatever He wishes. How should it be otherwise, when their own ancient scholars from India and elsewhere said that the world lives for thirty-six thousand years, or fifty thousand, or sixty-three thousand, and then is made anew, the earth and heavens being replaced with others, the South Pole

becoming the North, and habitable places being exchanged with uninhabitable ones, sea exchanged with land?

They might say, "But this does not help your argument, because it would mean that it would be replaced again."

We would reply, "That is entirely within God's power, but the Messengers ﷺ have told us that He will not do it, but that the world has three stages: nonexistence to begin with, then the existence which it presently has, and then the Return.

ISSUE: They say, "We deny that Paradise and Hell exist in such a way that their pleasures and torments could be tangible and corporeal."

Our response is that they believe transformation to be caused by natural phenomena influencing bodies through the motions of the celestial bodies. Their ancient predecessors held that the world passes through transformation, and the Messengers ﷺ also told of this. This transformation differs from that one. What reason do you have to deny that just as one transformation leads to annihilation, another might lead to immortality, the wisdom of this being that it is the purpose behind the immortality of the body? After all, most of you—if not all of you—agree that the substance of the sun cannot be immortal, while the substance of the soul cannot be annihilated; and you also believe that although the body is created, the substances from which it is composed are eternal, and that it is only a matter of circumstance that it does not endure forever. Furthermore, Paradise and Hell are the names of two realms. One of them contains palaces of gold, silver, pearls, rubies, and fruits, and those who dwell there live forever and experience those pleasures without ever feeling pain, sorrow, hunger, or thirst: *There they shall hear neither vain talk nor incitement to sin, but only the word, 'Peace, Peace!'* (Qur'ān 56:25–26). The other, Hell, is the opposite of that. All guidance is from God.





SEVENTH ASCENSION

The topic of this Ascension is the meaning of death and the question of whether it is a perfection or an imperfection. Death is the decomposition of the constitution, the body's inability to react to the soul due to the absence of sense and motion. Those who believe that the soul is eternal say that it means the soul's exit from the body, like a man who leaves a house in which he was staying as a guest in order to return to his own home; or, according to the aforementioned outline, like a person who wears a garment until it is so tattered and frayed that it falls right off him, and he is left naked and exposed.

The angel assigned to death is charged with carrying out the cause of death, which means the delivery of pain and the means of destruction to the soul, so that death occurs by his mediation. It is not rationally implausible that there may be other angels who deliver bitterness or joy to the soul, as sometimes appears to be the case.

As to the question of whether death is a perfection or an imperfection, the true meaning of imperfection is regression from the higher to the lower, whereas perfection means ascent from the lower to the higher. If a person ascends higher due to death, then it is a perfection. This is because man is always passing through stages of creation: from dust and nourishment to a sperm-drop, then a clot, then a morsel, then flesh, then bones; from a newborn baby to a weaned toddler, then a child, then a youth, then a man.

He goes from ignorance to knowledge, from an inanimate object to a living conscious being. Each of these stages is a perfection relative to the one before. If a human being were given an intellect inside his mother's womb, he would never wish to leave it because of how comfortable it is. A poet said:

When the world proclaims what trials it has in store,
The infant weeps at the moment he is born.
Why else should he weep, when his new home appears
So much vaster and richer than his former abode?
Coming into the world, he cries out as though
Frightened of the pain it will bring to him.ⁱ

The newborn weeps because its comfort is wrested away, and its environment is suddenly changed. The soul is stubborn. Even an old man, despite his many experiences, may feel uncomfortable and restless when he travels from his house to another, and be unable to sleep. To be exiled is distressing because of the sense of unfamiliarity it entails. A poetⁱⁱ said of this:

Men's homelands are made dear to them,
The places where they spent their youth;
Recalling their homelands reminds them
Of childhood ties, and they yearn for them.

Another said:ⁱⁱⁱ

Dearest to me of God's earth lies between

i Attributed to the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896).

ii Also Ibn al-Rūmī.

iii Lines attributed to an anonymous Bedouin girl (Hātīmī, *Hilyat al-muḥādara*, 1/389).

Man'ij and Salmā, may the clouds shade it;
 The land in which my amulets were hung,
 The one whose earth my skin first touched.

In sum, all the religious sciences pertaining to the divine commandments and prohibitions are ultimately concerned with this matter. That is why all the Messengers ﷺ urged mankind to turn away from the world, and why the ascetics desire to leave their homelands, families, children, and comfortable lives. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Be in this world like a stranger or a passer-by" (Bukhārī 6416). He ﷺ also said, "The world is like the shadow of a tree under which a man seeks shade, and then he leaves it behind."ⁱ The purpose is spiritual discipline: training the soul to bear discomfort, erasing all these things from the soul and wresting its comforts away from it, so that it despises all of these things. Then when it dies and evaluates what it gained from the world, it will find nothing but Himⁱⁱ and will perforce turn to Him; and it will not wait for long before it delights in joy everlasting. But if the soul was engrossed with wealth, family, and the pursuit of desires and worldly pleasures, all of which lead the soul to negligence, fill it with anxiety, and distract it from any thought of death, it will pass from one extreme to another, which is ruinous.

Out of kindness to His servants, therefore, the Lord Most High commanded them to move between the two extremes gradually. He has provided a manifest example of that in the life of this world in the form of periods of time, which He divided into four seasons according to the sun's movement through its cycle. He made the most temperate season, spring, the one in which bodies

i Ibn Mājah 4109 has: "My place in this world is but that of a traveller who seeks shade under a tree, then leaves it behind."

ii The pronoun here could also be taken to refer to the soul's disparagement of the world: "it will find nothing but that."

and plants grow, when colors deepen and the earth gives forth its splendor. God Most High says, *The likeness of the present life is that of water which We send down from the sky, so that it mingles with the plants of the earth* (Qur'ān 10:24). This period of time is like the stage of growth in the human being. Yet spring cannot have that status without being preceded by another time: winter, which is cold and moist. Rain falls and enters the earth, where it warms and churns, resembling the first stage of man's development. If God Most High took creation directly from winter to summer without spring in between, they would all be destroyed, for in winter bodies and plants are dominated by cold and moisture, while in summer they are dominated by heat and dryness. If they went directly from extreme cold to extreme heat, and from moisture to its opposite, dryness, disaster would ensue. But in His wisdom, God Most High separates them with another season that is similar to each, beginning with cold and ending with heat, with a gradual transition between them that is barely noticeable to bodies until it has passed. That is caused by the sun passing through the twenty-eight stations in the middle region through which the celestial bodies run. It has two different rising-places, which are the final points of its movement on the eastern horizon, on the two sides. When it reaches its end, the other point is more to the south, and it is on the lower horizon that winter comes.

Then the rays of the sun attract moisture, vapor rises from the sea, and the heat is reflected within the earth. Leaves fall because the water is drawn out of them from top to bottom. This is because the hot vapors are repelled by the cold from the surface of the earth and seek a center. When the earth becomes warm, it attracts moisture and it pulls at the moisture within the plants. When the moisture leaves the leaves and branches, they become dry and crumble and fall, and the second side comes. Dominant heat and dryness also cause hot weather as the sun gradually approaches.

It spends a month in each zodiac constellation and passes through one degree of the zodiac each day, although this passage is imperceptible as it happens. The more [the sun] approaches [the earth], the greater its heat becomes. The earth warms, moisture breaks down, and tree branches warm from above. As the branch warms, it requires water and seeks moisture from the region below it, and so on, until this reaches the base of the tree. The tree seeks it from the earth, and each level of the earth from the next. When water reaches the wood, the earth softens it, and a process takes place whereby the sun transforms the nutrients that the tree draws from water and soil into fruit, and so fruit grows from the substance of that wood by the leave of God Most High. Each fruit emerges in its particular natural form, instilled in it by the All-Knowing Creator through the mediation of the sun as it comes and goes, warming the earth in accordance with its passage through the constellations of the zodiac.

The Glorious Creator made the sun a means for growth and procreation whereby plants, animals, and minerals are produced. Minerals are produced by vapors which incubate in the earth, producing sulfuric gases through which water then passes, causing them to bond. This has been established by the experts of the sciences of chemistry and geology, who say that mercury bonds with sulfuric gas and supplies it from outside, either by being melted and poured on it, or by being boiled and left in it. When the liquid and sulfur mix, it forms the substance in the earth. If they are balanced, gold is produced; if there is an excess, then copper; if there is a slight deficiency, then silver.

This solar motion is related to the eastern motion. This is akin to a millstone on its axis. The axis covers one handspan in one revolution, while the outer rim of the circle covers five handspans in the same revolution. The same is true of windmills, watermills, and donkey mills. The rim of the circle turned by the water might

cover twenty yards or more in a single revolution, while the head of the spindle might turn a circle the size of a small coin in the same amount of time. Experts in the science of weights and measures have established that universal motion is the cause of the motion of the spheres, and that it is all one. Thus, it is that in a donkey mill we see the animal turn one way and the other wheels in the mechanism turn the other, the donkey's circular movement in one direction causing the various cogs and wheels to rotate in different directions.

They also tell us that because the sun is hot and fiery by nature, the divine wisdom and Lordly decree has given it a counterpart with an opposing nature; for if it were always extremely hot, everything would burn. Therefore, God Most High directed the moon to pass across with its coolness, to cool that which the sun heated, so that things would grow in harmony between them. He also made its motion rapid, because if it moved at the same speed as the sun its benefit would not reach growing things until it was too late and they were already corrupted, nor would the heat of the sun reach them until after they had become corrupted. God Most High says: *He it is Who made the sun a radiance, and the moon a light* (Qur'ān 10:5). There is also another purpose for this, which concerns living souls. The sun is the light which brings living beings from potentiality into actuality, and it has an important influence on human souls. It is by light that all things subsist. Then He made the moon a mirror which receives the sun's radiance by night and reflects it upon creation, so that they are never without it by night or by day. You might imagine that the horizons are sometimes devoid of sunlight, but that is not true: the horizons are filled with the lights of the sun, and the heavens and earth are never bereft of them. People only deny this because they refer to their own situation when the sun is facing them above their horizon, when the sky is filled with light. Then as the disc of the sun grows

distant from their region, the light decreases; there is less light in the afternoon than at midday, less at sunset than in the afternoon, less at twilight than at sunset, and less at midnight than at twilight. That is when the light is most distant from the horizon, which is why it is dark and hard for a person to see. Yet as long as there is nothing to block the sky, such as a ceiling or clouds, it can still be seen. Light is never altogether absent, and even in this attenuated state it is still useful. The light of the celestial bodies is from the sun, and it falls upon the earth. When the sun approaches from the east, the light increases there and continues to grow until the first dawn arrives, and then the second, and then the sky grows bright. Once the disc of the sun rises, day begins.

On nights when the moon is out, the body of the sun appears large; and because of its proximity to the earth, it is bright and reflects much light upon the earth. The extent to which the sun's light is reflected upon the moon depends upon how close the moon is to it. When it is fourteen mansions from it, its light is strongest. The scientists tell us that one of the properties of the moon is that it attracts moisture, whereas the sun dissolves it. The other celestial bodies only influence the elements that surround the earth, because they correspond to them in their subtle nature and correspond to reactive bodies in another manner: they are intermediaries between animals, plants, and minerals, resembling the celestial bodies in their simplicity, and reactive bodies in their density. They also tell us that reactive bodies react to these elements, and that animals and plants are composed of air, water, fire, and earth. However, they say that this occurs in a cyclical fashion, and that after these bodies are formed and then degenerate, they return to their elemental constituents and thereby they are transformed into one another. That is why they call it the world of generation and corruption. It is not impossible that the rays of the celestial bodies could have influence, and that these elements could be the

intermediaries between them and the bodies they influence; God Most High knows best. They do seem to be incorruptible themselves, which is indicated by the fact that their rays come from the sun as well as from themselves. If they increased or decreased, they would be subject to generation and corruption, and this would be apparent in them.

The ancients believed that the fire that surrounds the earth was formed from rising smoke, flammable gases, air from vapors that evaporates from the earth, and water, as they discussed at length. They believed that these elements could not move spontaneously, but something else such as the wind must move them; God knows best. They also thought that rain, snow, and wind only occur when the fiery bodies are in certain positions in certain zodiacs, so that their rays and motions cause their respective elements to combine. Then there are other instigators which cause the fiery bodies themselves to move and ascend in the midst of the universal motion, as was noted earlier. The ancients believed this motion to be voluntary and intelligent, based upon the will of the Glorious Creator, the Originator, the Maker, the Former; *Not an atom's weight escapes Him in the heavens or in the earth, nor anything smaller than that, nor anything greater, but it is in a manifest Record* (Qur'ān 34:3). He directs all things with the most beautiful direction, and measures them with the most perfect measure. All things move and act in accordance with that orderly direction and delicate measure, and not a single atom is added or subtracted. The ancients passed away, and all who came after them will follow them, and the heavens and their stars will remain as they are, and the earth and its animals and plants, nothing intruding into it that they could deny. It will remain so until the Glorious Creator returns it once more just as He originated it: *As He originated you, so you shall return* (Qur'ān 7:29). The entire world is like a single mortal human being with a life-span, a beginning and an end.

We have seen many times that God, Incomparably Perfect is He, created man in the image of the world, beginning as a weak human being and gradually growing, as we saw in the First Ascension. The first thing that God creates is the matter from which he is formed. Next, He creates in it the animal spirit, which develops in him slowly and gradually. Then the faculties of the rational soul develop in him in the same way. The weakest state is that of the nursing infant, who then grows into a young child; at that point he is endowed with the power of estimation and supposition, from which there forms the intellectual faculty. After he has grown a little more, the primordial faculty is created in him, which is the instinctual intellect wherein the first principles are held. This is usually around the age of fifteen to eighteen. That process continues until the discursive intellect is created in him so that he can discern possible and impossible things, which is like eyes opening in his heart. He resembles a man in a darkened room with a lamp far away from him, so that although he can see, his vision is feeble. Then the lamp comes gradually closer to him, and as it does so his vision becomes stronger, until at last it is right before him and his vision is perfect. If the lamp could go within him and provide light directly to his vision from his brain, it would be all the stronger.

In the same way, the psychic faculty continues to grow endlessly. Consider the difference between a Prophet and an infant, and all the degrees separating them. The soul gains in completeness from the moment of its creation until the moment of its death. Death, then, is the body's completion, for the soul leaves matter behind and joins the realm of the angels, which is the highest garden, the Garden of Angels. Or if the soul is damned, death is completion inasmuch as it means its exit from matter, but imperfection inasmuch as it means its descent from the higher side. It will suffer anguish and mourn the loss of its body and its pleasures and senses, because it was not in the least prepared to leave it, nor is its essence content

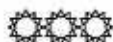
to leave those pleasures behind. When taken out of the body it mourns for it and remains in a state of misery, regret, and pain, stung by scorpions and bitten by snakes, chained and fettered for all eternity, *except as your Lord may will. Truly your Lord does whatever He desires* (Qur'ān 11:107).

Therefore, anyone to whom God Most High has granted intelligence and the ability to recognize his Creator and himself must strive to attain sincerity and always seek the good of this world and the Hereafter, for that is where absolute happiness lies. In this world he should be like a person whom the ruler of his time has sent to a land which he hates, and whose people, food, and language he detests. He knows that if he tries to leave or holds himself aloof from the people there they will torture and kill him, but if he remains in their company they will let him be. So, he must continue to live among them, speak to them, and eat with them, although his heart and mind are always fixed upon the home he left behind. If the king were to send him home, he would be overjoyed to part with them and return home. But suppose that instead he becomes one of them and switches his affections to them, coming to love their women and their way of life: when the king sends him home, he will be sad to go, and being parted from them will torment him ever after.

That is as much as can be said about the meaning of death. You understand the world and its nature. If you use your mind and contemplate this until it becomes clear to you, you will become a saintly person and an excellent servant to your Lord. You will have affinity with the angels, and love and affection will grow between you and them. But if you do not pay heed to it, or you explain it away, or you understand it superficially but not deeply, you will benefit little and regret much. We take refuge with God from such a fate, for ourselves and for you!

Here ends the Seventh Ascension, wherein you must employ your contemplative faculty, and it marks the end of our present objective. We hope that it will bring us closer to God Most High and inspire us to seek Him ever more ardently, by making us alert to those things that may serve as balances and mirrors for the contemplative faculty, so that we do not fall into error in much of our affairs. There is much disagreement among humanity, and countless schools of thought divide them. Many refuse to take knowledge from any source but an imam—especially the Imāmi sect, who claim that there is always an imam on earth who upholds the proof of God Most High to take humanity from guesswork to certitude, and save them from the darkness of doubt. To their way of thinking, even if one travels far from the Imam, he must refer to his guidance for each and every issue that arises for him.

A thorough examination of this subject would require a work of its own containing many volumes. However, dear brother, you have before you a man whose heart is distracted and preoccupied with many diverse thoughts, and whose tongue is weary and worn out from discussing so many contradictory matters, so that he hangs suspended between the world and Hereafter. Perhaps God will grant that he receive the supplications of the righteous and the prayers of the folk of true faith and the purified ones; otherwise, he will lack much and will live a straitened life. May Glorious God benefit us, one from another, by His might.





AFTERWORD: ABSOLUTE HAPPINESS

Happiness is of two kinds: that which is absolute, and that which is limited. Absolute happiness is that which begins in the world and then extends to eternity. Limited happiness is that which is confined to a given situation or time. All happiness has a cause, and there are various types of argument that constitute this cause. In the case of limited happiness, there are four causes, by which I mean academic causes, discounting craft and manufacture. These four are sophistry, rhetoric, argument, and poetry.

The goal and function of sophistry—though this is not its intended purpose—is to construct an argument that seems logical and sound although in fact it is not. You do so simply to defeat your opponent, though you do not realize that is what you are doing. For example, you might say, “Is not the carpenter a maker?” Your interlocutor replies, “He is.” You say, “Is he not a body?” He says, “Is the Glorious Creator not a maker?” You reply, “Yes.” He says, “Then He is a body.” Now this is a constructed argument, but it is false and blatant sophistry. Its falsehood hinges on the implicit claim that every maker is a body, for that is incorrect; otherwise, what proof is there for it? The happiness that this produces is limited to that of defeating the opponent. Some sophistry is caused by the ambiguous construction of an argument, as in our example, and some by the ambiguous use of language. You might say, “A bat is a flying animal; ball games are played with bats; therefore,

ball games are played with flying animals."ⁱ The error here is that the word happens to be the same, but the definitions differ, for a wooden bat differs entirely from the animal called a bat in both definition and actuality. Or consider an example where writing the dots over the Arabic letters can entirely change the meaning, such as in, *I inflict My punishment upon whom I will* (Qur'an 7:156), where *man ashā'* (whom I will) can be altered to *man asā'* (he who does wrong) by removing the dots from above the letter *shin* (ش) to turn it into a *sīn* (س). To examine this exhaustively would require a full volume.

Next is rhetoric, whose purpose is to convince the listener of something so that his soul feels entirely at ease with it, even though he is not actually certain of it. This is what a preacher does with his congregation, producing beautiful and eloquent words that remind them of death and strike fear into them for the purpose of moving their souls.

Next is poetry, whose purpose is to impact the soul and stir the appetitive and irascible faculties by likening things to other things. For example, a poet said:

He is the sea: dive into it for pearls when it is placid.

Beware of it, however, when it is rough and foaming.ⁱⁱ

The object of this praise would feel delighted to hear it, for it likens his generosity and wealth, as well as his strength and authority, to the sea. Or consider the poet's words:

i The author's example here actually concerns differing uses of the Arabic word *'ayn*, whose many meanings include "eye", and "currency." "An eye can see; a silver coin is currency; therefore a silver coin can see." An analogous example from the English language has been substituted.

ii From a poem by the Iraqi court poet al-Mutanabbi (d. 354/965) in praise of his patron Sayf al-Dawla.

If anyone could elude the All-Merciful's attention,
Of all His servants, Banū Asad could elude it.¹

Or consider what a poet said to his wife to dissuade her from remarrying:

If fate should part us, do not marry
Some hairy-necked, tight-fisted wretch!

A person can even be put off something good merely by its being described to him in ugly terms. If he were drinking from a freshly-made glass but someone said to him, "Such glasses are used to hold blood drawn from lepers," he would be put off and stop drinking. Or if someone threw him a rope and said, "Look out!" he would flee [as if it were a snake]. Or if someone said, "This honey is as yellow as urine!" he would be repulsed and lose his appetite. This, then, is the purpose of rhetoric and poetry.

As for debate, its purpose is to defeat one's interlocutor by referring to common facts, such as how God Most High says to the Jews, *If you claim that of all people you alone are the saints of God, then long for death—if what you say is true* (Qur'ān 62:6). It is commonly known that a lover wishes to meet his beloved, and an analogous argument might be, "If you loved meeting with Zayd, you would be his friend; and since you do love meeting with him, you are indeed his friend." The conclusion conforms to the premise. In the case of the Jews here, this would be represented as, "If the Jew loved to meet God Most High, then he would be a saint; in fact, however, he hates [the thought of] meeting God, Exalted is He, and therefore he is not a saint." Another example is how Abraham عليه السلام said to his opponent, *Then God brings the sun from the east, so bring it from the west* (Qur'ān 2:258).

Generally, the aims of these sciences are confined to worldly benefits, unless they are directed towards the Hereafter, as the Prophets ﷺ did in their speeches and debates. The world is the vehicle to the Hereafter, harmful if sought for its own sake but beneficial if sought for the sake of the Hereafter. The happiness gained through these sciences, then, is commensurate with the purpose for which they are employed.

The sciences by means of which academic happiness is sought may be divided into four categories: natural, mathematical, political, and divine. The purpose of natural science is to know the world and its composition and temperament, and to study plants, animals, minerals, diseases, and the humors and the causes of their soundness and corruption. It has a specific function, and it is to the other sciences what bread and food are for man.

Mathematics has four categories: geometry, arithmetic, logic, and astronomy. The purpose of geometry is to study dimensions, quantities, and measures; it is a tool to be used. The purpose of arithmetic is well-known. The purpose of logic is to discern intellectual matters by recourse to sensible matters, and to distinguish sound argument from doubt in matters of doctrine. The purpose of astronomy is to study the spheres and their motions, bodies, and other properties, which provides knowledge concerning cosmic phenomena. The purpose of divinity is to study four things: God Most High, His angels, His Scriptures and Messengers, and the Last Day. The purpose of politics is to refine the soul in order to attract benefit and repel harm, in both the short and long term.

Humankind is always engaged in these sciences, which function for them either as nourishment or as medicine. The Messengers were sent to elucidate them all. The extent to which they provide happiness is as we have described, except that they differ for different individuals depending on their circumstances, their gifts, their nature, their aptitude, and their intelligence. The aforementioned

division [between nourishment and medicine] is determined by this. Therefore, we may say that the sciences which are like nourishment are the divine sciences; no one can do without them, and all other sciences serve only to further explain them. The Creator is the foundation, and anyone who is ignorant of his Maker has nothing to stand on. Beyond this, the sciences that are analogous to medicine are specialized, apart from some aspects of politics which are universal inasmuch as they relate to certain individual duties which all people must know. As for all the other sciences, one must use them only as much as he needs to, and only if he needs to. Otherwise, it is better to occupy oneself in something more useful, since everyone has many things to occupy him. As for the science that is like disease, it is anything that would cause a person harm given his particular condition. If we find that something harms a person when he is exposed to it, then it is a diseaseⁱ for him. Honey tastes sweet to a person suffering from excessive phlegm, but bitter to a person suffering from an excess of yellow bile, because in his case it is a disease. Knowledge is judged according to its wider context, for God Most High has created

People to whom truths are as detrimental
As the scent of a rose is to a dung beetle.ⁱⁱ

The Prophet ﷺ said, "Speak to people in a way they can understand" (Bukhārī 127). Jesus ﷺ said, "Do not hang pearls around the necks of swine."

Bestowing knowledge upon fools is a waste;

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- i Reading *dā'* (disease), rather than *dawā'* (medicine) as it is given in the printed edition.
 - ii Verses by the Umayyad poet Kuthayyir (d. 104/723).

Withholding it from those in need is wrongdoing.ⁱ

You may say, "All this is doubtless true, but the divine sciences are the subject of much dispute, and there are many different sects among the adherents of Islam. Whose opinion should I trust?"

Know, dear brother, that as long as you seek to know the truth through men rather than relying on your own insight, your efforts will be wasted. A man with knowledge is like the sun or a lamp that gives off light; but you must also use your eyes to see. If you are blind, what good will the lamp or the sun do you? Anyone who relies on blind conformity will be utterly ruined.

You may ask, "What is the way out of this?" Now, that is a weighty topic that requires much time to explain; and as I have said, I am preoccupied, distracted, and weary. But you must know that the attributes which describe God Most High are divided into three categories: the necessary, the impossible, and the possible. There is no cause to affirm any possible attribute to be His unless the Messenger ﷺ affirmed it first; and as for the necessary and the impossible, you may deduce them by means of the intellect.

You might say, "I will pursue this, but from where should I take it, and how should I reach it?" I will explain enough to you to satisfy this immediate curiosity.

You might say, "Also, what should I do about those secondary rulings that relate to political matters, about which the imams such as Mālik, al-Shāfi'i, Abū Ḥanīfa, Aḥmad, and others differed?" My answer is that this question relates to disputes concerning both primary and secondary matters of religious law. The question of primary matters has already been settled, and I promised you that I would address the rest. When it comes to disputes about secondary matters, you have two choices. One is to learn the fundamentals

i Attributed to Imam al-Shāfi'i.

of jurisprudence and legal rulings to an extent that transcends simple conformity,ⁱ and then act in accordance with what you have learned, leaving aside the opinions of others, whether you agree or disagree with them. That is one solution, and I have written a book on the subject entitled *Risālat al-aqtāb* (The Treatise on Poles),ⁱⁱ which addresses the fundamentals of jurisprudence with particular reference to the method of demonstrative proof. If you wish you may commit it to memory, as well as the science of hadith and the Sunna, or at least acquire the relevant books on the subject. The science is comprehensively covered in three works. Al-Zaydūnīⁱⁱⁱ compiled his work on legal rulings derived from hadiths; the *Farā'id* of Ismā'il al-Qāḍī^{iv} is one of the best works on the subject, as is the *Aḥkām* of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarī,^v also known as *Shifā' al-'alil* (Healing for the Sick). Through the fundamentals of jurisprudence, you will be guided to what you now lack.

If you cannot do this, you must resort to the second solution, which is to consider each matter of dispute and then choose whichever position is closest to perfection. For example, Abū Ḥanīfa deemed that it is lawful to perform ablutions using water in which fruit has been soaked, while Mālik did not, and therefore you should follow Mālik's more cautious position. Do the same for al-Shāfi'i when it comes to facing the Qibla as accurately as possible, reciting the Basmala before the Fātiḥa in prayer, and reciting the Fātiḥa even when praying behind an imam, since his opinion on those matters is more cautious than that of Mālik.

i Reading *taqlid* rather than *taqlil* (reduction) as in the printed edition.

ii As noted above, this work has been lost.

iii An Andalusian scholar of the 6th /12th century.

iv A hadith master of Baghdad (d. 282/896).

v Otherwise known as Ilyiyā al-Harrāsī (d. 504/1110); a hadith master from Nishapur who was al-Ghazālī's colleague at the Nizāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad.

Those, then, are the two solutions for walking the path of perfection. If you cannot do either, then you must conform to one imam exclusively and adhere to his school of law. The laws pertaining to outward matters are simple to deal with.

You might say, "I understand all this, but what is more difficult for me is the matter of intellectual issues, in which it is difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. The preceding only tells me how to avoid difficulties with secondary matters."

In answer to this, know first of all that all the matters into which the intellectual faculty may delve can be divided into four categories: intelligibles, sensibles, conventions, and information.

Intelligibles are things that can only be perceived with the intellect and in an abstract sense, such as our knowledge that opposites cannot meet, or that a thing cannot be in motion and at rest simultaneously, or that one comes before two, or that temporal things have a beginning, or that anything that accompanies a temporal thing for a period of time must itself be temporal. In sum, it means everything that you know only through the intellect.

Sensibles are things that you know through the five senses, such as the differences between colors, tastes, touches, sounds, and smells.

Convention means the norms of peoples, places, communities, and times, such as people's customs regarding clothing, amusement, songs, or stories. It also includes noble behavior such as refraining from injustice, honoring one's parents, expressing gratitude for favors, not offending one's neighbors, correcting wrongdoers, or spreading greetings of peace. These now have the status of complements to religious rulings, though in regard to the Messengers they are intelligibles. They have long been matters of custom, among the Arabs as well as other communities such as the Indians and others. In general, every community has a king to protect them against injustices, and that is how the world endures.

Information means things that are received by transmission, which means the report of a trusted person or people.

So, whenever any kind of knowledge comes to you, whether you happen to hear it or it is directly presented to you, consider which of these four categories it belongs to. The properties of intelligibles never change from how they are perceived in the mind. Sensibles never change either, but they can be mistaken due to impairments in the instruments of the body. As for conventions and information, they are not trustworthy, since they differ between communities, places, and individual circumstances. Place each kind in its proper category and distinguish it from the rest, and you will never blunder. If you establish something by proof of reason or the senses, and you are certain about the particulars of its definition and its argument, and those particulars and that argument have demonstrated themselves to be true, then you may trust it for your proposes, for it is a valid proof. If something is presented to you that falls short of this, place it in its proper category, and do not let it stray beyond its bounds. Do not confuse information with intelligible fact, or convention with sensible fact, or vice versa. Consider also the source from which information is received. For example, the Qur'ān is the miracle of the Messenger of God ﷺ, and you know for certain that this Qur'ān was received from our Prophet Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim ﷺ, who came from Mecca. You also know of his existence and his life story, which is a matter of mass transmission.

As for legal rulings, they are received as information, and it is not necessary that their proofs be demonstrated to us, for humanity are in need of them, and if they could deduce them with their intellects there would be no call for the Messenger ﷺ; and just as they could not deduce them independently in the beginning, neither can they do so in the end after they have been transmitted to them.

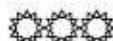
This is why each individual is not held responsible for proving all of the laws to which he holds.

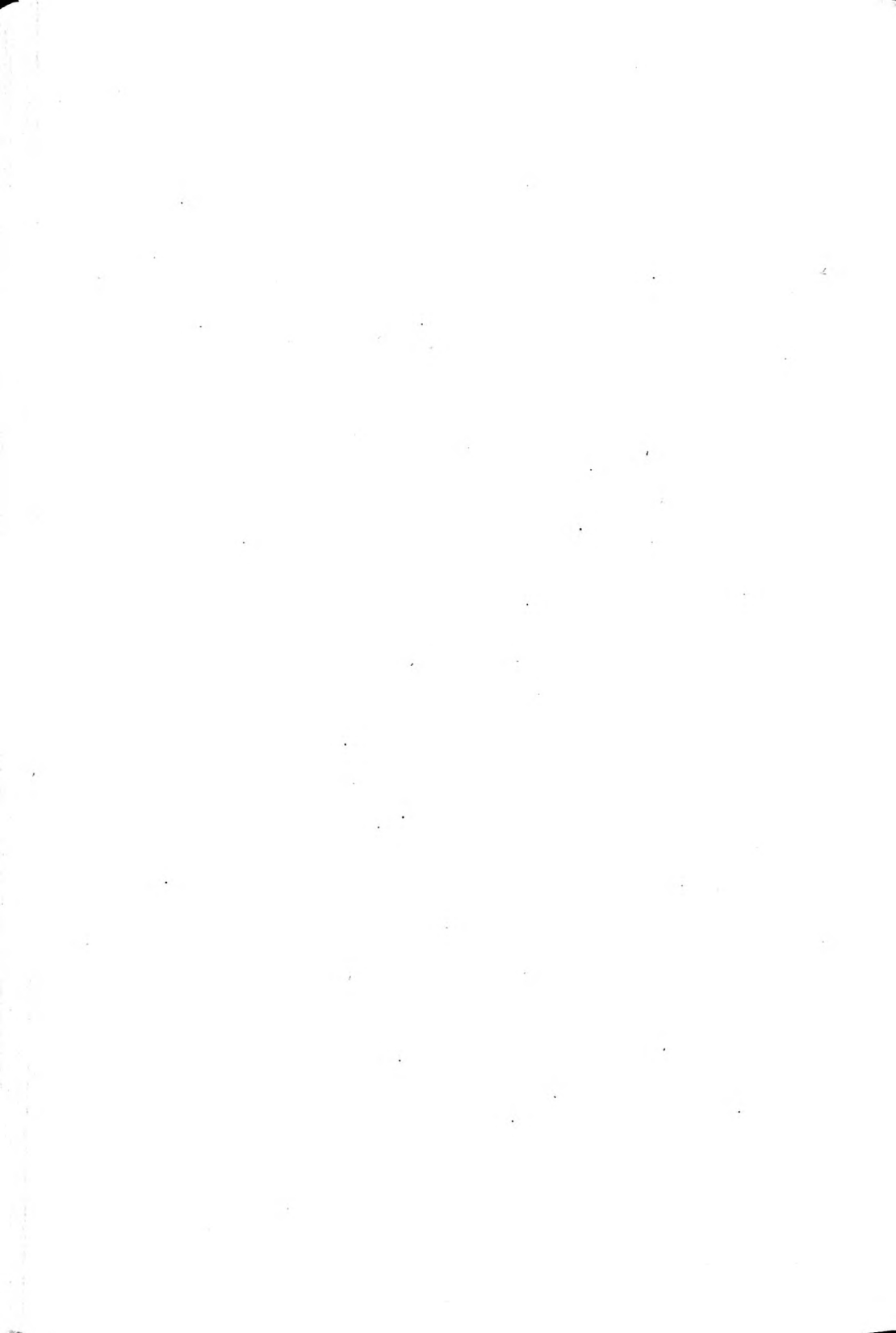
That is all that I wished to present as an introduction to the divine sciences and an allusion to the spiritual secrets that lie beyond. If fortune allows me the time and the good health to elaborate further in the future, then those seeking guidance may be satisfied; and if not, they are encouraged to find it elsewhere.

We ask the Lord, Hallowed and Exalted is He, to purify us and heal us, to illuminate our vision, to inspire our tongues with truth, and to grant us a blessed end. We ask that He be with us in all that we do, and that it all be for Him. We ask Him to forgive us when we stand before Him in need of His pardon, desperate for His grace, separated from our families and homes, departed from our children, removed from our parents, divided from our friends and relations, abandoned by our kith and kin; when the eyes glitter, the lips dry up, and the feet grow rigid; when *they will not speak, nor be permitted to offer excuses* (Qur'ān 77:35-36); when the dying man answers not those who call him, and sees not their anguished mourning as he dies.

My brethren, I remind you of God Most High, and I advise you to hold onto Him and be with Him. *Be not deluded by the life of this world, nor harbor illusions concerning God* (Qur'ān 31:33 and 35:5).

May blessings and peace be upon the Prophet of Mercy, the Intercessor for the Community, Muḥammad. May God bless him and his Family and Companions, and grant them abundant peace. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.

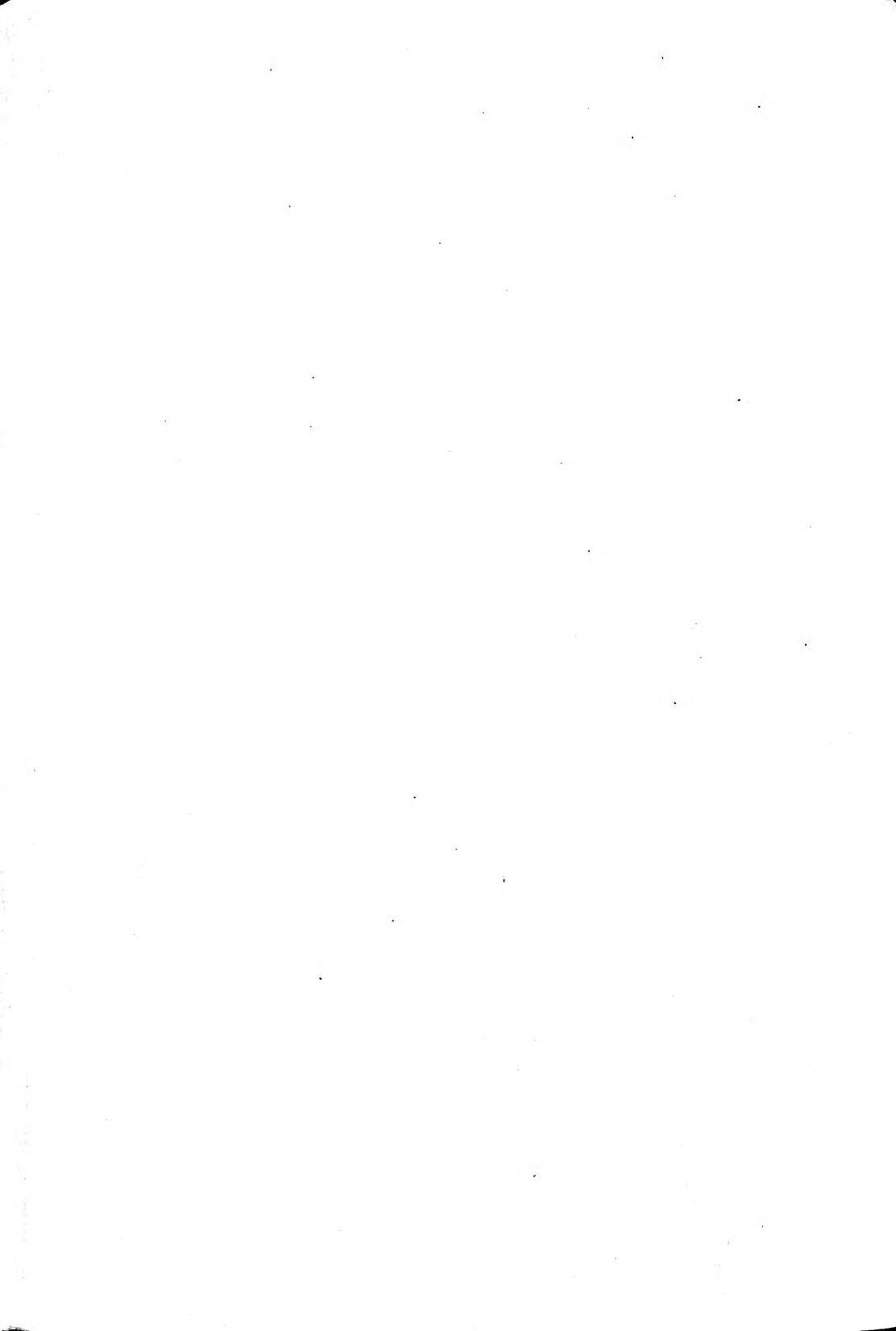






THE RULES OF INTERPRETATION

Qānūn al-ta'wīl





*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION

Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds. May blessings and peace be upon our master Muḥammad, the Prophet sent as a mercy to the worlds, and upon all his Family and Companions.

To proceed: The imam and ascetic Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Ṭūsī, may God have mercy on him, was asked to explain the meaning of the Prophet's ﷺ words, "Satan runs through each of you as blood runs" (Bukhārī 2038; Muslim 2174). The questioner wanted to know if this means that Satan mixes with their blood in the manner of two liquids mixing, or is immersed in it like a stick dipped in liquid. Does it mean that he inserts thoughts into the heart from the outside, which the heart then transmits to the senses, where they become fixed and turn into temptations; or does it mean that his essence touches the essence of the heart directly? His question also concerned the similar phenomenon of the jinn appearing to human beings in the forms of animals or other things, or the angels appearing to the Prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, in the forms of human beings or in other forms in the same manner, such that the veil is lifted from them for those who are able to see them,

and then they are garbed in a dense corporeal form. Is there any way, [he asked,] to reconcile these descriptions of jinn and devils, supported by tradition, with the philosophers' opinion that these beings are merely explanatory similes for the four humors that lie within bodies and influence them? Or are they irreconcilable?

And what of those who are possessed by jinn? When they speak, is it the jinni speaking, or it is the possessed person speaking feverishly in the throes of his painful condition? What about when they speak of matters of the unseen and predict the future? The naturalists say that this is the result of an excess of black bile, which they call melancholia. Are they ultimately the same thing?

What about the narration in which the Prophet ﷺ said that when Satan hears the azan, he retreats, breaking wind (Bukhārī 608; Muslim 389)? Is this a metaphor for his fear and anxiety, or does it mean that at such a moment he really has a body that emits wind? As far as the questioner understands it, Satan is a simple being who does not require nourishment; how, then, could he perform an action that is no more than a consequence of consuming food? Similarly, what does it mean that devils feed on dung and bones? Even if this means their scent alone, are the jinn not simple beings that do not possess the compound senses?

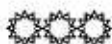
And what of the Isthmus (*barzakh*)? Are its inhabitants the people of Paradise or the people of Hell? After all, what other abode is there in the Hereafter but those two? If it be said that it is the border that they share, which is described as *a wall with a gate with mercy on its inside, while its outside faces toward torment* (Qur'ān 57:13), is that correct? Or is it something else? Why does the Isthmus have to exist at all? For if a person's good deeds outweigh his bad, he goes to Paradise; and if the bad outweigh the good, he goes to Hell; and if they are perfectly balanced, his fate falls to the divine will. Does the Isthmus mean the wait before his fate is decreed, whether it shall be grace or damnation?

The questioner also asked whether the angels will dwell alongside man in the bliss of Paradise in the Hereafter or will have some other abode. Are they the youths referred to in the Qur'ān,ⁱ or are those youths a fourth kind of creature that is neither angel, man, or jinn; and are the lovely-eyed companionsⁱⁱ a fifth kind, or what are they exactly?

The Scripture also says that Paradise is *like heaven and earth in expanse* (Qur'ān 57:29). This implies that heaven is contained within something else which exceeds it in size.

He also asked about the Celestial Pool of the Prophet ﷺ in the Hereafter: is it situated within the Judgment-Ground, or is it in Paradise? The hadith seems to suggest that those who are spared from Hell will drink from it during the terrors of the Judgment before it is over, and before the Intercession. And is its water from Paradise or from elsewhere? Surely it must be from Paradise, since the Prophet ﷺ said, "He who drinks from it will never feel thirst again" (Bukhārī 6579; Muslim 2292). Or could anything on earth be from Paradise? Do all the Prophets ﷺ have Celestial Pools, or is that one of the privileges unique to our Prophet, peace be upon him, like the Intercession?

The questioner hoped that the Imam would provide long and detailed answers to these questions, God willing.



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- i Immortal youths shall wait upon them; if you saw them, you would think they were scattered pearls. (Qur'ān 76:19), et al.
 ii And We shall pair them with lovely-eyed companions (Qur'ān 44:54), et al.



IMAM GHAZĀLĪ'S RESPONSE

These are questions that I dislike delving into or answering, for a number of reasons. But since they are so frequently asked, I shall provide a general rule that may be applied to matters of this kind. What I have to say is as follows.

There often appears at first glance to be a conflict between reason and tradition. Those who delve into such issues often divide into two extremes, one on the side of tradition and the other on the side of reason; there are also those who try to piece together a middle way to reconcile the two. On the one hand, there are those who take reason as the foundation and make tradition subordinate to it, and so do not take great pains to look into the tradition. On the other hand, there are those who do the opposite, making tradition the basis and not showing great concern for reason. Others still try to take both as foundations and strive to reconcile them. Taking all this into consideration, they constitute five factions.

The first are those who are interested only in tradition. They halt at the first station of the path, and are convinced by their initial understanding of the outward meaning of the revealed text. They believe unquestioningly and indiscriminately in anything that has been transmitted. If they are confronted with an apparent contradiction in the tradition and are forced to explain it, they will decline to do more than say, "God can do anything." For instance, if they were asked how it could be that a person can see Satan in two places at once, or in two forms at once, they will answer,

"There is nothing surprising about that, given the omnipotence of Almighty God; He can do all things." Nor would they hesitate to affirm that it is possible for God to allow a person to be in two places at once.

The second faction are those on the opposite extreme, who are concerned with reason alone and show minimal regard for tradition. When revelation agrees with them, they accept it; when it does not, they claim that the Prophets must have invented it because of their duty to make things comprehensible to the masses, which might sometimes entail presenting things contrary to how they truly are. Whenever something does not accord with their rational views, they dismiss it in this manner. The rationalism of such people is so extreme that it amounts to unbelief since they attribute lies to the Prophets ﷺ, even if they be lies for the common good; and the entire Muslim community agrees that to make such an accusation against the Prophets is a capital offence. The first faction's only shortcoming is that they seek to be safe from the dangers of interpretation and investigation, to the extent that they willingly choose ignorance. The two factions are superficially similar inasmuch as they both seek a way to avoid dealing with apparent contradictions; but there is a vast and obvious difference between saying, "God can do anything, and we cannot know the true nature of His marvels", and saying, "The Prophet only said what he said for the common good, even if he knew it to be false."

The third faction make reason their foundation, and afford it a greater degree of importance than they do tradition. They do not set any store in outward appearances or initial thoughts that contradict rational principles, and so they avoid falling into snares of confusion. However, if they encounter anything from the tradition that appears to contradict reason, they deny it and call it a forgery, unless they consider it to be authentic at the level of mass-transmission such as the Qur'ān, or something worded in a way that

can be easily interpreted. If it is difficult to interpret, they would rather deny it outright than engage in far-fetched interpretations. The danger of this stance is obvious: it involves the rejection of authentic hadiths transmitted by trusted narrators, which is how revelation reaches us.

The fourth faction make tradition their foundation and study it at length, amassing a great deal of superficial knowledge of it while avoiding rational enquiry for the most part. This means that they sometimes encounter apparent contradictions between reason and tradition; but since they have not studied the rational sciences to any degree of depth, they do not always recognize rational impossibilities, which are often difficult to spot without a good deal of scrutiny based on many premises that follow one from another. Another consequence of this is that if something is not absolutely impossible, they judge it to be possible. They are not aware that there are three categories: that which is proven to be impossible, that which is proven to be possible, and that whose possibility or impossibility is unknown. The third category is the one where they slip up, because they usually deem anything that falls into this category to be possible, having no reason to think it impossible; but this is just as erroneous as judging something to be impossible because one does not have reason to believe it to be possible. The proper way to categorize such things is to put them in the category of that whose possibility or impossibility is unknown, either because it is beyond human capacity, or because the person concerned does not have enough information at his disposal to judge, nor anyone to tell him. For an example of the former, consider the inability of the human eye to determine whether the number of stars in the sky is even or odd, or to judge the size of the stars accurately because they are so distant. For an example of the latter, consider the capacity of a given person to identify the twenty-eight lunar mansions from east to west, and

other such things which some people can tell on sight, but others cannot. The same disparity can be found among different minds in matters of reason.

Now since this faction have not studied the rational sciences in any depth, they do not consider very many things to be impossible. This spares them from a great deal of difficult discussion concerning interpretation, since they do not see the need for it to begin with. For instance, a person who is unaware of the notion that God cannot be confined by direction will not see any need to resort to interpretation in order to understand Qur'ānic passages speaking of God as being "above", or "settling" upon the Throne, and other such phrases that imply direction.

The fifth faction is the middle faction, comprising those who seek to combine the study of reason and tradition and make a foundation of both of them. They deny that there can be any contradiction between reason and revelation, and they say that to deny the one is to deny the other; for it is by reason that the truth of revelation is recognized, and were it not for the ability of the intellect to appraise evidence and arrive at the truth, we would not know the difference between Prophet and pretender, truth-teller and liar. How could reason deny revelation, when it is only by reason that revelation is affirmed?

This faction has the correct view of things and stands upon the straight path; yet the path they have chosen is steep and daunting, greatly ambitious and fraught with peril. They strive for a tremendously difficult goal, and follow a highly hazardous road. Upon my word, it is as easy as can be for a few things, but extremely difficult for most. It is true that the one who applies himself to the study of these sciences to a great degree of depth will be able to reconcile reason with tradition for most issues by employing obvious interpretations; yet however well he succeeds, he will still find himself confronted by two situations. The first is when the

only interpretations that suggest themselves are the more elaborate ones that many people simply do not understand. The second is when he can find no interpretation at all, and the text remains a mystery to him, such as the letters that occur at the beginning of certain chapters of the Qur'ān, for which the tradition provides no explanation. Anyone who thinks that he can evade these two problems is either not sufficiently schooled in the rational sciences and is therefore unaware of all the rational impossibilities, such that he deems something possible merely because he does not know it to be impossible; or else he has not studied the tradition sufficiently to have encountered the many narrations that contradict reason. To such a person I offer three recommendations.

The first is that he should not aspire to discover all of this, which is what I would usually advise, since it is not a reasonable goal. Let him reflect on God's Words: *and you have not been given knowledge, save for a little* (Qur'ān 17:85). He should not find it difficult to believe that such things are concealed even from great scholars, let alone from intermediates. Any scholar who claimed to know what the Prophet ﷺ meant by everything he said would only be displaying just how narrow his intellect is.

The second recommendation is that he never deny the arguments of reason, as the intellect does not lie; if it did, it would deny revelation itself, since it is only by means of it that we know revelation at all. If the character witness is a liar, why should we care if he tells us that the witness is honest? For revelation is the witness who testifies to the details, and reason is the character witness. If you could not trust reason, you would not be able to argue that God is not confined by direction or form. When you are told that mankind's deeds will be weighed (Tirmidhī 2141), you are aware that deeds are accidents which have no weight, and therefore that some interpretation must be required. When you hear that death will be brought forth in the form of a white ram and slaughtered

(Bukhārī 4730; Muslim 2849), you know that this too must be interpreted, for death is an accident that cannot be "brought forth," since accidents cannot move through space. Nor does it have a form like that of a white sheep, for accidents cannot turn into bodies. Nor can death be slaughtered, for to slaughter means to sever the neck from the body; and death has neither, since it is an accident—or else it is nothing at all, according to those who say that death is merely the absence of life. Either way, interpretation is inescapable.

The third recommendation is that he refrain from specific interpretations when there is a contradiction between two possibilities; for judging the intent of Almighty God or His Messenger ﷺ by means of guesswork and assumption is a dangerous thing to do. One can only know a speaker's intent if he makes it plain; if he does not, all one can do is imagine all the possible meanings and then apply a process of elimination based on reason and evidence until only one remains. However, the range of possible meanings in the Arabic language is vast, and even if one could allow for all of them, it would still be safer to refrain from making a definitive judgment regarding an interpretation. For example, if you are aware by reason that deeds cannot be weighed, yet a hadith says that they will be, you must consider the word "weighed" and the word "deeds" and the possible interpretations of either. If "deeds" is the figurative element, then perhaps it refers to the scroll on which deeds are recorded. If "weighed" is the figurative element, then perhaps it means "appraised" in the sense that the worth of the deeds will be judged, since that is the essential purpose of weighing. Should you render your verdict now as to which word is the figurative one, without further recourse to reason or tradition, you are presuming to know God's intent based on guesswork alone.

Guesswork and assumption are simply ignorance. They may be permitted when they are required in order to make decisions

regarding worship, righteous action, and other matters within the scope of *ijtihad*. However, for those matters where no action is involved, but only knowledge and doctrine, how should one dare to make judgments based on nothing but assumption? Yet most interpretations are exactly that: guesses and assumptions. In such matters the intellect has two choices. It can rule based on assumption, or it can say, "I know that this cannot be meant literally, since it is contrary to reason; but I do not know exactly what it means, nor do I need to know, since it has nothing to do with action, nor is there any way to uncover the certain truth about it. I would rather not guess." Any intelligent person would agree that this is better, safer, and more likely to ensure one's safety at the Resurrection. For it may well be that on that Day one will be asked, "Did you make judgments about Us based on assumptions?" It is improbable, though, that one will be asked to explain why one did not attempt to ascertain the subtle hidden intents of God's Words in passages that are neither related to actions nor relevant to doctrine—except in the general sense of faith in His Word, which is no more than to say: *We believe in it; all is from our Lord* (Qur'ān 3:7). Such an interrogation does not seem likely at all, and in any case, it would be easy to answer. It was for this reason that when Imam Mālik ؒ was asked about God's settling upon the Throne, he replied, "The settling is known, but the 'how' is unknown. Believing in it is a duty, and asking about it is heresy."



These recommendations will surely have made clear the extent of my aversion to answering such questions. Nevertheless, I will offer my assistance regarding at least some of them.

First, the Prophet's ؐ words "Satan runs through the son of Adam as blood runs" allude to how his influence flows through

the entire human body just as blood does. It does not mean that his body mixes with the human being like two liquids mixing. This statement is based on a rational analysis that would take too long to explain here. As for how he touches the heart, it is not by means of imagination manifested by the senses; I feel the temptation in my heart, but I do not imagine anything or see anything with my eyes when the temptation stirs. Most of the premises on which this assertion is founded are based on sensory evidence. Temptations from Satan are [in that respect] like inspirations from the angels. We encounter various thoughts in our hearts, some inviting us to indulge in base desires, others urging us to resist them. These thoughts must be different from one another, given their differing implications; and since they are temporal phenomena, they must require causes. Differing things must have differing causes. The name that Revelation assigns to the thing that causes inspiration is "angel," while the name it assigns to the thing that causes temptation is "devil." Inspiration is the name of the urge to do good, temptation is the name of the urge to do evil, and angels and devils are the names of their respective causes. Fire lights the sides of a room and blackens the ceiling, and so we know that light is mixed with blackness, and that the cause of the light is the fire's glow, while the cause of the blackness is its smoke. Likewise, we know that temptation and inspiration do not share the same cause. There then remains the question of whether this cause is an accident or a self-subsistent substance; and if it is a substance, whether or not it is alive. Revelation provides proofs that it is a living substance, and there are also rational proofs for this.

As for the view of the naturalists and philosophers that these beings are merely metaphors for the four humors, it is simple ignorance. The influence of the humors is limited to the four natural states of heat, cold, moisture, and dryness. Matters of thought, belief, and knowledge cannot be determined by these natures,

which are inanimate accidents. Rather, they descend from above the terrestrial level, and consequently are either non-spatial substances or spatial bodies. They cannot be anything else, and they must either be subtle like wind or dense like other bodies. This theory applies to angels, jinn, and devils. Some hold that everything that is self-subsistent is a body, even the Creator—transcendent be Almighty God beyond what they allege!—because they cannot conceive that anything could exist without a body.

Others say that everything that is self-subsistent is a body except for God Almighty, and that it is inconceivable that any self-subsistent substance could exist [without a body] except for Him.

Others say that angels, jinn, and devils are all self-subsistent tangible substances, but are not bodies or mobile beings. They hold that notions of descent, transportation, coming, and going apply to them only in a figurative sense, just as they do to God. Some of them even broaden this argument to include the substance within man that is cognizant and aware; some say it is an indivisible and non-spatial part, neither inside nor outside the body, neither connected with nor divided from it, being on a different plane entirely from such qualities. I will not recount what I have discovered about this through personal experience. To speak of it in general terms would not be to reveal it but only to expect you to take my word for it, and I am no more worthy of being blindly followed than anyone else. There is no use in blind following when it comes to matters of reason. Nor will I explain it at length, for that would take too long; and even if it would not, it is better to follow the example of the Messenger of God ﷺ and refrain from speaking of it. If he did not explain all the secrets of the spirit, which is ultimately what we are speaking of now, there is no reason for anyone else to attempt it.

As for how the Prophets and saints have visions of angels and devils in various forms, these are mostly likenesses that represent

the true natures of those beings in a manner visible to the eye. Likewise, people may dream of the Prophets and receive their wisdom, but what they see in those dreams is a likeness of them, not their actual persons transported and presented before them. I have discussed this in more detail in the Book on the Marvels of the Heart.¹ The same applies to the jinn, which is why they are seen in different forms, for they have countless facets that can be represented by likenesses. The Prophet ﷺ too is not always seen in the same form. The difference is that the Prophets and saints see these likenesses in the waking world, but others see them only in dreams. An authentic hadith states that the Prophet ﷺ only saw Gabriel in his true form twice (Bukhārī 3756; Muslim 2477), despite how often he saw him in other forms.

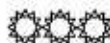
As for the things that possessed people say, and the notion that a jinni may cause the person it possesses to utter unintelligible words, it is true that the jinn may induce thoughts, images, and imaginations to appear in the hearts of those they possess which cause them to speak and move. The words they utter in this state are like the words a person speaks in his sleep, which are after all his words and no other's. As for a possessed person predicting the future, it is because everything that is, was, and will be is recorded in a certain creation of God that is sometimes called a Tablet, or a Register, or a Book. As God says: *it is in a manifest Book* (Qur'ān 6:59 et al); *all things We have enumerated in a clear register* (Qur'ān 36:12). All things are recorded therein in the same manner as the Qur'ān is recorded in the brain of one who memorizes it, not like figures written upon a finite physical object; for the infinite cannot be written upon the finite in the manner of a normal book. The heart is like a mirror, and so is the Tablet, but there is a veil between them. When it is lifted, the images in

i The first book of the Fourth Quarter of *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

the Tablet are reflected in the heart. The veil is distraction, for the heart is always distracted in the world, mostly because of its engrossment in thoughts about the things that the senses present to it, which keep it constantly occupied. When the senses are dulled by sleep or possession, and the imbalance of the humors does not cause any other inward distraction, the heart may catch a glimpse of some of the images inscribed upon the Tablet. To explain this any further would take too long. I have touched on the matter in the Book on the Marvels of the Heart.ⁱ The same applies to the things that manifest in the throes of death, when a person may be shown his place in Paradise as a good tiding, or in Hell—God forbid—as a warning. For when the process of death begins and the spirit is about to depart, the senses are dulled.

As for the hadith about devils feasting upon bones, Satan breaking wind, the Prophet's ﷺ Pool, and the Isthmus, I have nothing to say about what they truly mean. Some of them I would not recommend attempting to interpret at all, while others are purely matters of tradition; and I am by no means a hadith master. The location of the Pool could only be ascertained by studying the hadiths narrated about it in tradition. The Isthmus might be a level between Paradise and Hell for those who have neither good nor bad deeds to their account, such as the insane or those who never received revelation. To judge either way would be pure guesswork, unless some proof could be found in tradition.

God knows best what is right, Incomparably Perfect and Exalted is He.



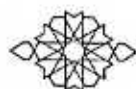
i Book 21 of *The Revival of Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*).



PROTECTION OF THE MASSES
FROM THEOLOGY

Iljām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām





*In the Name of God,
the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful*

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

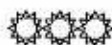
Praise be to God, Who discloses Himself to all of His servants through His Attributes and Names. He bewilders the intellects of the seekers in the vastness of His grandeur, and clips the wings of any thoughts that might trespass upon the hallowed ground of His might. He soars, in His majesty, beyond the reach of any mind that seeks to comprehend His true Reality. He expands the hearts of His saints and elect, and engulfs their spirits until they burn up with love for Him and are dazzled in the illuminating lights of His magnificence. Their tongues are unable to praise the beauty of His Presence, save with those of His Names and Attributes that He has allowed them to hear and has conveyed to them through His Messenger Muḥammad, the best of His creation, may God bless him and his Family, Companions, and progeny.

Now, you have asked me, may God grace you with right guidance, about the traditional texts that seem to imply a resemblance between God and creation, at least to crude ignoramuses and errant anthropomorphist's, who entertain beliefs about God Most High and His Attributes that are entirely below His station and contrary to His holy transcendence. For instance, they believe that He has a

form, a hand, and a foot, that He descends and translocates, that He sits upon the Throne and is established there, and other such ideas which they have taken from the outward literal import of those texts. What is more, they claim that such beliefs constitute the creed of the early Muslims (*salaf*).

You wanted me to explain to you what the creed of the early Muslims was, and to tell you what the masses ought to believe about such texts, and to uncover the truth to you and clarify the distinction between what must be examined and what must be left alone. I will comply with your request, seeking to draw nearer to God Most High by demonstrating the plain truth, without any bias or partisanship, and being careful not to favor any particular school of thought over any other. Allegiance is owed to the truth first and foremost, and it is truthfulness and sincerity that must be favored. I ask God Most High to grant me strength and grace; for only He can answer those who call upon Him.

I shall arrange the book in three chapters. The first will explain what the approach of the early Muslims to these texts actually was. The second will prove that the way of the early Muslims is the correct approach, and that those who dissent from them are heretical innovators. The third will examine various beneficial matters of relevance to this subject.





CHAPTER I

THE CREED OF THE EARLY MUSLIMS

Know first that the unequivocal truth, regarding which there is no debate among the people of inner vision, is the way of the early Muslims, by which I mean the Companions and the Followers. Let us then examine it, along with its proofs.

The nature of the approach of the early Muslims, which we hold to be the truth, is that if any of these hadiths is conveyed to an ordinary person, he must conform to seven obligatory points regarding it: [1] affirmation of divine transcendence; [2] acceptance; [3] acknowledgment of one's own incapacity; [4] silence; [5]; discipline [6] self-restraint; and [7] deferring to the people of knowledge.

Affirmation of divine transcendence means disassociating the Lord Most High from corporeality and all that this implies.

Acceptance means believing in what the Prophet ﷺ said, and that it is true, and that he was truthful when he said it; and that it is true in exactly the sense in which he meant it.

Acknowledgment of one's own incapacity means admitting that one is unable to understand what it means; and that that is not one's business or one's calling.

Silence means not asking about it or enquiring into its meaning, knowing that to ask such questions is heretical innovation, to delve into it is perilous for one's religion, and by doing so one is at risk of inadvertently straying into disbelief.

Self-restraint means to avoid attempting to alter or reorder such expressions by replacing them with other words to the same effect, or add to or subtract from them, or to combine or isolate them. One must confine oneself to those exact words and that exact expression, in terms of order, grammar, declension, and syntax.

Discipline means to hold back from contemplating such expressions and delving into their meanings within oneself.

Deferring to the people of knowledge means understanding that although the issue is too obscure for one to understand, that was not the case with the Messenger ﷺ, nor with the Prophets, the folk of true faith, or the saints.

These, then, are seven dutiesⁱ which all of the early Muslims held to be incumbent upon the masses. One should not entertain the notion that the early Muslims disagreed on any of them. Let us examine them one by one.

First Duty: Affirmation of Divine Transcendence

What this means is that when one hears mention of the "hand" and "finger" in the Prophet's ﷺ words, "God Most High kneaded Adam's clay with His Hand for forty mornings,"ⁱⁱ and "The believer's heart is between two of the All-Merciful's fingers" (Muslim 2654), one must understand that the word "hand" has two meanings.

The first meaning, which is the original usage, is a limb composed of flesh, bones, and sinew. Now flesh, bones, and sinew are

i "The Book of Duties" (*Kitāb al-Wazā'if*) is how this treatise is entitled in some manuscripts.

ii Al-'Irāqī attributes this hadith to al-Daylami in *Musnad al-firdaws*.

all bodies with particular properties. A body is something with a given length, width, and depth, which prevents anything else from occupying the space it occupies unless it moves.

However, the word "hand" is also used figuratively to mean something else that is not a body at all. For example, one can say, "The city is in the governor's hand," and this would make sense even if the governor did not have hands.

Laypeople and experts alike are therefore obliged to realize with certainty that by that word, the Messenger of God ﷺ did not mean a body, a limb composed of flesh, bones, and sinew—and that this is impossible for God Most High, who transcends such things. If someone entertains the notion that God Most High is a body composed of limbs, then he is an idol-worshipper; for all bodies are created, and to worship a created being is unbelief. The reason why idol-worship is unbelief is that idols are created, and they are created because they are bodies. Anyone who worships a body is an unbeliever, by the consensus of all Muslims from first to last. This is true whether the body be dense like solid mountains, or subtle like air or water; or dark, like earth, light like the sun, moon, and stars, or transparent like air; whether it be immense like the Throne and Footstool, or minute like a seed; and whether it be inanimate like a stone, or alive like a man. The body is an idol; and regardless of its beauty and goodness, magnificence and splendor, solidity and purity,ⁱ it remains an idol.ⁱⁱ

Conversely, one who upholds His transcendence of corporeality, and of possessing physical hands and fingers composed of flesh and sinew, thereby upholds His transcendence of all that entails temporality. He must then believe that this word is an expression of a certain meaning which is neither a body nor an accident in a

i Some printed editions have *baqā'* (permanence) rather than *naqā'* (purity) here.

ii Some manuscripts have "a body."

body, and that this meaning properly befits the attributes of divine majesty and grandeur. If he does not know what that meaning is, or understand its nature, then he is by no means responsible for discovering this. It is not his duty to know its interpretation and its meaning; indeed, his duty is to avoid delving into that, as we shall see.

Another example: when one hears the word *ṣūra* ("image", "form", "appearance", etc.) in the statement, "God Most High created Adam in His own form" (Muslim 2612), or "I saw my Lord in the best form,"¹ one must understand that the word *ṣūra* too has more than one meaning. It can be used to denote the form resulting from the composition of bodies in a particular order, such as the nose, eyes, mouth, or cheeks, which are bodies composed of flesh and bone. However, it can also be used to denote something that is not a body at all, such as when one speaks of the form of a particular issue, or the form of an event, or says that a governor's province is managed in the best possible form, and so on.

Every believer, therefore, must realize that in the case of God Most High, the word *ṣūra* is not meant in the first sense, namely that of a body of flesh and bone composed of a nose, mouth, cheeks, and eyes; for all of these are bodies and forms in bodies, while the Creator of all bodies utterly transcends any resemblance to them or their attributes. If he knows this for certain, he is a believer.

If he then wonders what this word might mean if it does not mean a physical form, he should be aware that he is not required to know the answer, but rather is commanded to refrain from delving into it, since it is beyond his capacity to understand. However, he must believe that whatever it does mean, it must be something that befits the majesty and grandeur of God Most High, not a body nor an accident in a body.

Another example: when one hears of the "descent" (*nuzūl*) in the words, "Every night, God Most High descends to the lowest

heaven (Muslim 758),” he must know that “descent” too has more than one meaning. When used in a general sense, it implies the existence of three bodies: a higher body, a lower body, and a body that moves from the higher, where it usually resides, to the lower. It therefore expresses the movement of a body from above to below. If the movement is from below to above, it is called an ascent, a climb, or an incline; if it is from above to below, it is called a descent, a fall, or a decline; and so on.

However, the word can also be used to mean something else, in which there is no implication of bodily movement or translocation. For example, God Most High says, *He sent down for you of cattle eight pairs* (Qur’ān 39:6). No camel or cow was ever seen descending from heaven in a physical sense; rather, they are created in the womb. Their “sending down” must therefore mean something else. Or consider the words of al-Shāfi‘i, “I went to Egypt, but they did not understand my words, so I descended, then descended again, then descended again.”ⁱ He did not mean that his body moved downwards.

The believer must therefore realize that the descent of God Most High does not correspond to the first meaning, namely the translocation of a person or physical object from above to below, since persons and physical objects are bodies, but the Lord is not a body. If he wonders what this descent actually means, he should be answered thus: “If you cannot understand how the camel could have descended from the sky, how could you hope to understand how God Most High descends? This is not your territory, so step back. Engage in your worship or earning your livelihood, and keep silent. What matters is that you know that it must mean some other sense of descent which the Arabic language admits, and which

i That is, “I spoke in simpler terms.”

befits the majesty and grandeur of God Most High, even if you do not know what exactly that is or how it works."

Another example: When one hears the word "above" (*fawq*) in God's Words, *He is the Dominant above His servants* (Qur'ān 6:18), or His words, *They fear their Lord from above them* (Qur'ān 16:50), one must be aware that the word "above" also has two meanings. The first is a relationship between two bodies where one is higher and the other is lower, such that the higher one is on top of the lower. However, it can also be used in a different sense, such as when one says that the caliph is above the sultan, and the sultan is above the minister; or when one says, "So-and-So came to the prince's court and sat above So-and-So;" or when one says, "Knowledge is above action," or "Goldsmithing is above tanning."

The first sense implies the existence of a body that lies in relation to another body, while the second does not. The believer, then, must firmly believe that the first sense is not what is meant, for that would be impossible for God Most High, since it is a trait of bodies or the accidents that dwell in bodies. Provided that he understands that this is impossible for the Eternal Lord, he is not obliged to know what it actually means, for God has excused him from that burden.

There are many other examples of this, of which the same exact thing could be said.

Second Duty: Faith and Belief

What this means is to know for certain that all these expressions are meant to denote things that befit the majesty and grandeur of God Most High, and that the Messenger of God ﷺ was truthful when he used them to describe God. One must believe this, and be certain that what he said is true and that what he conveyed is undoubtable truth. He should say, "We have faith, and we believe,

that every way in which God described Himself, or His Messenger described Him, is exactly as He described it, and is true—in the meaning He intended, and in the way in which He said it, even if I do not know what it means.”

You might say, “But one can only believe something after envisaging it, and faith can only come after comprehension. If a person does not know what these expressions mean, how can he believe that they are true?”

The answer is that it is by no means impossible to believe in things in a general sense. Every intelligent person knows that these expressions must have some meaning, and that every name designates a named entity, so that if someone addresses people and uses that name, he has that entity in mind. One might believe that he is lying and saying something false about that entity, or one might believe that he is telling the truth about it. This kind of general belief is certainly conceivable, and is possible to understand these expressions in a general rather than a particular sense, and to believe in them that way. If someone says, “There is an animal in the house,” one can believe him without knowing whether that animal is a human, a horse, or otherwise. Even if he said, “There is something in the house,” one could believe him without having any idea what that thing is. Likewise, when one hears of God “settling on the Throne,” one can understand this in a general sense to mean a certain relationship to the Throne, and one can believe in this before knowing the nature of that relationship. Whether it means establishment upon it, or exercising the will to create it and bring it into existence, or having dominion over it, or some other kind of relationship, it is possible to believe in it.

You might say, “But what is the point of addressing mankind using words they cannot understand?”

The answer is that He meant these expressions for those who are able to understand them, namely the saints and those who are

deeply rooted in knowledge; and they do understand them. When addressing intellectuals, one is not obliged to use language that any child could understand; and the masses are like children compared to the people of knowledge. However, children must ask adults about things they do not understand, and adults must tell them that it is not their concern, for it is not meant for them, and they ought to discuss something else. Thus, the ignorant are told: *Ask the people of remembrance, if you do not know* (Qur'ān 16:43). And when they ask the people of remembrance, they will explain it to them if they are able to understand it. If not, they will tell them, "*You have not been given knowledge, save a little* (Qur'ān 17:85); *Do not ask about things which, if they were disclosed to you, would trouble you* (Qur'ān 5:101). Why must you ask such things? These are things in which one must believe, though their modality is unknown"—that is, unknown to you—"and to ask of them is heretical innovation." As Mālik رحمته الله said: "The settling is known, but the modality is unknown. Believing in it is a duty, and asking about it is heretical innovation."

It is therefore possible to have faith in generalities whose details are unknown to the mind. It is the transcendence of God—the denial of all that is impossible for Him—that must be understood in detail, for this means to deny corporeality and all that it implies. When we deny that He is a body, we mean an entity with given proportions of length, width, and depth, which prevents anything else from occupying the space it occupies, and which repels what seeks its position if it is stronger, or else is repelled from it if it is weaker. The meaning of this word is obvious, but I have explained it here because an ordinary person may not know exactly what is meant by it.

Third Duty: Acknowledging One's Incapacity

Anyone who does not understand the meaning and true nature of these expressions, or how to interpret them, or what is meant by them, must admit that he is unable to do so; for to believe is necessary, even when one is unable to comprehend. If he claims to understand them, he is lying. That is what Mālik meant by "the modality is unknown:" that the details of what is meant by it are not known. Those who are deeply rooted in knowledge, and the saintly sages, have surpassed the limitations of the masses and journeyed many miles through the open expanses of knowledge; yet even so, they lack more knowledge than they possess. Indeed, what is hidden from them is incomparably greater than what they have discovered, so great is the disparity between the known and the unknown.

The Master of the Prophets ﷺ said of the unknown: "I cannot praise You sufficiently; You are as You have praised Yourself" (Muslim 486). And of the known, he ﷺ said: "Those of you who know God best are those who fear Him most; and of all of you, I know God best."² And because incapacity and imperfection are ultimately inevitable no matter how far one progresses, the master of all the folk of true faith [Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq] رضي الله عنه said, "The inability to comprehend is itself comprehension."³ Thus even the elites of humanity cannot grasp the farthest ends of these concepts, just as the masses cannot even begin to grasp them. How, then, could it not be their duty to acknowledge their incapacity?

Fourth Duty: Being Silent and Refraining From Asking

This is obligatory for the layman, since by asking he may expose himself to something he cannot bear, and delve into something for which he is not qualified. If he asks an ignorant man, the answer

will only make him more ignorant, and it may even drag him into unbelief without his realizing it. If he asks a learned man, the one he asks will be unable to make him understand because it is beyond his level, just as an adult cannot make his infant son understand why he runs his household the way he does, or even how going to school is for his own good. Or consider how a goldsmith cannot make a carpenter understand the intricacies of his craft. The carpenter may have great insight into his own profession, but the finer points of goldsmithing are beyond him. After all, he only understands carpentry after having spent his whole life immersed in its study and practice, just as the goldsmith has done with his own profession—and before doing so he did not understand it either.

Those who are engrossed in this world, or in sciences that have nothing to do with knowledge of God Most High, are unable to grasp divine matters, just as those who do not study crafts are unable to grasp those crafts. The nursing infant cannot be nourished by bread and meat because his constitution cannot accept them, not because bread and meat are unavailable. It is not that bread and meat are unable to nourish the strong, but that the weak are by nature unable to be nourished by them. Anyone who feeds bread and meat to a feeble infant, or allows the infant to get hold of them, will doom him. So, it is for the layman who seeks answers for these matters. He should be discouraged, prevented, and even beaten back with a whip, as 'Umar ؓ did with those who asked him about the ambiguous passages of the Qur'ān. The Prophet ﷺ once found some people delving into the subject of predestination and asking questions about it. He said, "Is this what you have been commanded to do?" (Tirmidhi 2133). He ﷺ also said, "Those who came before you were only ruined by their excessive questioning," or words to that effect, as is well-known in the Tradition (Muslim 1337).

Therefore, I say that preachers who speak from pulpits are forbidden to address such questions by engaging in interpretation or detailed examinations. Rather, they should do not more than the early Muslims did, which was to emphatically affirm the divine transcendence and incomparability, and that God is entirely beyond corporeality and all that it implies. The preacher may be as emphatic about this as he pleases, and may even say: "Whatever occurs to your mind, or whispers in your conscience, or takes form in your imagination—God Most High is its Creator, and He transcends it and any similarity to it; and no such thing is meant by those expressions in Traditions. What they truly mean is not something that you are meant to know, or to ask about. Devote yourselves to God-consciousness: whatever God has commanded you, do it; and whatever He has forbidden you, abstain from it. And this is something that has been forbidden you, so do not ask about it. Whenever you hear anything of this kind, be silent and say, 'We believe and have faith, and we have been given but a little knowledge, and this is not something we have been given.'"

Fifth Duty: Refraining from Meddling With the Received Expressions

Ordinary people must stick to the exact wording of these traditional texts, and refrain from meddling with them in any of six ways: translation (*tafsīr*), interpretation (*ta'wīl*), alteration (*taṣrīf*), inference (*tafrī'*), combination (*jam'*), and decontextualization (*tafriq*).

(1) By "translation" I mean substituting for the Arabic word an equivalent from another language, such as Persian or Turkish. It is not permitted to use any expression other than the one received

from the tradition.ⁱ This is because there are words in Arabic that do not have exact equivalents in Persian. Others do have Persian equivalents, but those equivalents are not used conventionally in the same figurative senses as the Arabs employ them. Then there are words that mean several things in Arabic, but not in Persian.

An example of the first is the term *istiwā'* (to settle), for which there is no term in Persian that means the same but also carries the same degree of ambiguity as *istiwā'* does for the Arabs. The Persian term would be *rāst istādan*.ⁱⁱ This term is composed of two words: the first carries the sense of uprightness and straightness in something that could potentially be crooked and leaning, while the second carries the sense of motionlessness and stability in something that could be imagined to move and agitate. The sense of these concepts in the Persian term is much more concrete than in the term *istiwā'*; and if they imply different things, they cannot be equivalents. It is only permissible to substitute for a word another that means exactly the same as it, not something that differs with it in any aspect, nor something that contrasts with it even in the slightest degree.

An example of the second is how the Arabic word *ishba'* (finger) can be used to mean "favor," as in, "to owe someone a favor." The Persian word for finger is *angusht*, but the Persians do not use the word in this figurative way. The Arabs in general are more given

i This poses a conundrum for a translator writing for non-Arabic speakers, who is obliged—according to Imam Ghazālī, at any rate—either to simply leave words untranslated unless there is an exact one-to-one substitute in the target language, which would render any translation unreadable, or to risk breaking this rule in order to provide the non-Arabist reader with a comprehensible text. If opting for the latter, the translator must strive to find expressions that are as close as possible to the sense of the Arabic, and the reader must bear in mind that both the original word and the translation often carry shades of meaning that are common to neither, the nature of language being what it is. We hope that Imam Ghazālī will forgive us for making such an attempt here.

ii Literally meaning, "to stand right", or "to stand upright".

to metaphor and figurative expression than the Persians, and in truth there is no comparison between the flexibility of the Arabs and the rigidity of the Persians in this regard. If a figurative expression happens to be pleasant to Arabs but jarring to Persians, the heart will shrink from what is jarring to it, and the ear will reject it rather than incline to it. Given this disparity, no translation that employs such a substitution could hope to convey the exact meaning. On the contrary, it will conflict with it; and only exact substitutions are permitted.

An example of the third is the word *'ayn*. Usually, one would translate this word with its most common meaning, which in Persian would be *chashm* (eye). But in addition to "eye," the Arabic word *'ayn* also means "spring," "gold," and "sun," while *chashm* does not bear any of those other meanings. The same is true, analogously, of the words *janb* and *wajh*. It is because of this that we say that one must refrain from using substitutions, but confine oneself to the Arabic.

You might say, "But if you claimed that this disparity exists in all words that would be incorrect: the Arabic *khubz* (bread) means exactly the same as the Persian *nān*, and the same applies to *lahm* (meat) and *gūsh*. If you allow that this is true of some words, then you should forbid substitution only when there is disparity, not when equivalents exist."

My reply is that it is true that this disparity exists only in some words and not all. It may well be that the Arabic *yad* (hand) and the Persian *dast* mean the exact same in both languages, and share all the same figurative meanings. However, if we say that we may categorize words into those that may be translated and those that may not be, it would by no means be a simple task for anyone to distinguish between the two and make decisions about subtle points of difference. On the contrary, there would be much confusion, and it would be impossible to tell points of disparity from

points of equivalence. We must therefore decide whether to close the door altogether by way of caution, since there is no pressing need to engage in such substitution, or to open the door and expose the masses to peril. Upon my word, which do you think is safer and more cautious, when we are talking about the Essence and Attributes of God Himself?

I do not believe that any intelligent religious person would fail to recognize the danger inherent in this matter, and that it is essential to avoid danger when it comes to the divine Attributes. Consider how a woman recently divorced or widowed must observe a waiting-period before remarrying to ensure that she is not pregnant lest the child be attributed to the wrong father, a cautionary ruling to ensure that the laws of inheritance and lineage are properly observed. Consider how the clerics say that this waiting-period must be observed even when the woman is infertile, post-menopausal, or pre-pubescent, or when contraception has been used, because none but the Knower of the Unseen can see what is within the womb. If we were to allow speculation in such instances, we would run the risk of peril, and so maintaining the waiting-period even when there is no pregnancy is better than taking such a risk. And just as the obligatory waiting-period is a ruling of the Law, so too is the prohibition of substituting Arabic expressions, established by independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) and by the principle of erring on the side of caution. For it must be that exercising caution when it comes to reports concerning God Most High and His Attributes, and whatever is intended by the words of the Qur'ān, is even more important than being careful about the waiting-period and other issues for which the jurists prescribe caution.

(2) The second kind of meddling is interpretation, which means to explain the meaning of something after discounting its literal sense. This may be something that the layman says to himself, or that a knowledgeable person says to the layman, or that a

knowledgeable person says to himself which is between him and his Lord. Those, then, are three situations.

The first, for the layman to interpret the meaning for himself independently, is forbidden. It is like diving into a deep sea without knowing how to swim, which is certainly forbidden; and the sea of knowledge of God Most High is deeper and more daunting and perilous than any body of water, for to die in that sea leaves no promise of another life to come. Perishing in the sea of this world is nothing but the end of the ephemeral life, while dying in that sea robs one of [goodness in] the eternal life. What a difference there is between these two dangers!

The second, for the scholar to provide the interpretation to the layman, is also forbidden. It is like a competent swimmer dragging someone into the sea with him who is unable to swim, his heart and body floundering about. This is certainly forbidden, since it is to expose another person to danger of death, as the swimmer will not be able to protect him in the open sea, even if he could protect him in the shallows. If he told him to remain in the shallows, he might not obey. If he told him to be still when the waves approached and crocodiles came with their jaws wide open to swallow him up, his heart and body would be stricken with panic, and he would not keep still even if he wanted to, for it would be beyond his power. Such is the likeness of the scholar who opens the door for the layman to engage in interpretation and non-literal textual analysis.

Now when we say "layman" here, this includes the man of letters, the grammarian, the hadith narrator, the exegete, the jurist, the theologian, and any other learned person, except for those who have dedicated themselves to learning how to swim in the oceans of experiential knowledge (*ma'rifa*), devoting their lives to it and turning away from the world and passions, spurning wealth, renown, people, and all other pleasures, sincerely devoted to God

Most High in all their knowledge and action, upholding all of the laws and protocols of the religion by keeping to obedience and abstaining from sin, emptying their hearts entirely of all besides God, for God, spurning the world and even their Hereafter and the Highest Paradise in favor of love for God Most High. These are the ones who are qualified for plunging into the sea of experiential knowledge. Yet despite all this, they are still in grave peril; and out of every ten of them, nine will perish before one has the fortune to claim the hidden pearl and the buried secret. It is for them that God has *destined the reward most fair* (Qur'ān 21:101), and they are the victorious. *And truly your Lord knows what their hearts conceal and what they disclose* (Qur'ān 27:74).

The third situation is when a knowledgeable person engages in interpretation to himself within his secret heart, between him and his Lord. This itself has three aspects; for when a person has an idea in his heart about the meaning of expressions such as "settling" or "above," this idea must either be certain, doubtful, or confident conjecture. If it is certain, let him believe it. If it is doubtful, he must drop it, because one must not make a judgment about the intended meaning of the words of God Most High and His Messenger if that judgement could just as easily be wrong as right. When in doubt, one must reserve judgment. If his idea is confident conjecture, then it must be that this conjecture falls short of certainty because of two things. The first is the question of whether or not the notion is possible in respect of God. Even if he is sure that it is possible, it must still be the case that he is unsure as to whether or not it is actually the intended meaning of the expression.

For example, consider the interpretation of the word "above" as meaning figurative elevation, such as when one says, "The sultan is above the minister." We do not doubt that it is correct to attribute such a notion to God Most High, but we might harbor doubts about the meaning of the word when God says, *They fear their*

Lord from above them (Qur'ān 16:50): does this mean figurative elevation, or does it mean something else that befits the majesty of God Most High—excluding spatial elevation, which is impossible for something that is not a body or an attribute of a body?

An example of the other [i.e. the question of whether or not the notion is possible in respect of God] would be to interpret the "settling over the Throne" as meaning a particular relationship of the Throne, namely that God Most High acts upon the world and directs all things from the heaven to earth through the mediation of the Throne, such that He does not bring anything into being in the world without first bringing its image into being in the Throne, in an analogous manner to how a writer does not produce anything on paper without first formulating it in his brain, or how a builder does not make the building without first envisaging it in his brain. Through the mediation of the brain, the heart directs the affairs of its world, which is its body.

Now, the person who entertains this notion might be uncertain as to whether or not this relationship between the Throne and God Most High is actually possible, whether in the sense that it is simply necessary for Him, or in the sense that He has made it His way of doing things although He could easily do otherwise, just as He made it His way to compel the heart of man to direct its affairs only through the mediation of the brain. He could easily have allowed him to do without the brain if that had been His beginningless will as destined by His eternal Word, which is His knowledge; but since that was what He willed, it became impossible for it to be any other way—not because it was outside His power, but because nothing can contravene His eternal will and beginningless knowledge. Thus, He says, *You will find no change in the way of God* (Qur'ān 33:62). It does not change because it is necessary, and it is necessary because it issued from beginningless necessary will; and that which is caused by something necessary

must itself be necessary. Its contravention is impossible, not because it is intrinsically impossible, but because it is extrinsically so, since otherwise the beginningless [Divine] knowledge would be transformed into ignorance, and the beginningless [Divine] will would be prevented from being carried out.

That said, the attribution of this relationship between God Most High and the Throne, wherein it is a mediator for the direction of His kingdom, is rationally possible; but is it actually true? Here is where uncertainty comes in, for one might suppose that it is. This, then, is an example of a situation where the conjecture hinges on whether or not the idea is true, while the first exampleⁱ illustrated a situation where the conjecture hinges on whether or not the idea is the actual meaning of the text, although it is true and possible. There is a difference between the two. Either way, when one of these conjectures arises in the mind and disturbs the heart, one cannot simply choose to dispel it from the soul. One is forced to entertain the conjecture, for it is caused by certain inevitabilities that cannot be repelled. *God charges no soul beyond its capacity* (Qur'ān 2:286). However, a person in this situation has two new duties.

The first is to prevent himself from becoming so at ease with the belief that he forgets that it could be mistaken. He must not pass judgement, even within his own soul, on something that is no more than conjecture.

Secondly, when he thinks of this belief, he must not tell himself that it is definitely the meaning of "settling" or "above," because that would be a judgment on something that he does not know, and God Most High says, *Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge* (Qur'ān 17:36). Rather he should say, "I think that this is what it means." That way, his statement will be a truthful

i This refers to the example of the meaning of the word "above."

expression of what is in his soul and his conscience. It will not be a judgment about the Attributes of God Most High or the meaning of His Word, but a judgment about his own soul and an expression of his conscience.

You might say, "But is it permitted to mention this idea to other people, and to give voice openly to what one's mind harbors? What if one is completely certain about the belief? Is one allowed to speak of it then?"

My reply is that there are four hypothetical situations wherein one might speak of one's belief: with oneself; with someone else who has equal insight; with someone who is capable of acquiring this insight due to his intelligence, discernment, and devotion to seeking knowledge of God Most High; or with a layperson.

If one is certain about his belief, he may speak to himself about it, and also speak to those of equal insight or those who are devoted to seeking knowledge of God and capable to acquiring it. Such a person must be completely free of inclination towards the world and its appetites, or partisanship towards schools of thought. He must not desire to be renowned for his learning, or to show off by divulging it to laypeople. If he satisfies all these requirements, then there is no harm in speaking of one's belief with such a person. When an intelligent person is thirsty for knowledge—knowledge, and no other motive—the problems caused by literalism will disturb his heart, and this may cause him to stumble into false interpretations due to his strong aversion to the literal meaning of the text. Denying knowledge to those who are worthy of it is simply unjust, just as giving it to those who are unworthy is unjust.

As for the layperson, one should not discuss such beliefs with him. "Layperson" here means anyone who does not possess the aforementioned attributes. Such people are those meant by the aforementioned example of giving solid foods to a nursing infant who cannot cope with them.

If the belief is only a strong suspicion, one may speak of it to oneself; indeed, this is unavoidable, since as long as the mind harbors an idea, whether it be suspicion, doubt or certainty, the soul will discuss it with itself, and no one can escape or prevent this. Naturally it is forbidden to discuss such suspicions with laypeople, even more so than for beliefs which are certain. As for the question of discussing them with one's intellectual peers, or with those who have the aptitude for them, this is debatable. One might say that it is permitted, for it is but a matter of saying "*I think*," which is honest. Or one might say that it is forbidden, since he is able to leave it alone, and by mentioning it he will express conjectures about the Attributes of God Most High or the meaning of His Word, which is a dangerous thing. The permissibility of this could only be established by a primary text, a recorded consensus, or an analogy to a primary text, and no such thing exists; indeed, on the contrary God says: *Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge* (Qur'ān 17:36).

You might say, "There are three proofs that it is permitted. The first is that it is permitted to speak the truth, and when he expresses his opinion, he is speaking the truth, for he is only expressing what he suspects to be the case. The second is that the statements of the Qur'ānic exegetes are based on guesswork and suspicion, for none of what they say was taken directly from the Messenger ﷺ; rather it was arrived at by independent reasoning, which is why there are many diverse and contradictory opinions among them. The third is that there was consensus among the Followers that it was permitted to transmit ambiguous reports that were conveyed by single Companions rather than mass-transmitted. As long as a report was transmitted from one trustworthy person to another, they considered it to be authentic and allowed its narration, even though the statement of a single trustworthy person can afford no more than strong suspicion."

The answer to the first argument is that speaking the truth is permitted on condition that it not cause harm, but the dissemination of these beliefs is by no means harmless, for someone might hear it and be so convinced by it that he deems it to be certain truth, and therefore pass judgment about the Attributes of God without knowledge, which is dangerous. Souls are naturally averse to the difficulties posed by literalism; and when they find a way out of these difficulties, even if it is no more than conjecture, they will incline towards it and take it as fact, though it may actually be mistaken. By doing so, a person may believe something false about the Attributes of God, or judge His Word to mean something that it does not.

As for the second argument, namely that the claims of the exegetes are based on conjecture, we do not admit this to be the case with respect to the Attributes of God Most High such as "settling," "above," and so on. It might be true when it comes to legal rulings, stories of the Prophets or the unbelievers, counsels, parables, and other such things where error is not especially grave.

As for the third argument, some say that for this subject, the only reliable proof is a text of the Qur'ān or a mass-transmitted report from the Messenger ﷺ, transmitted through so many witnesses that it amounts to knowledge, not mere conjecture. The reports of single narrators, they say, are not admissible for this subject; those who are inclined to interpretation should not interpret such reports, and those who confine themselves to narration alone should not narrate them, because this would amount to relying upon conjecture to pass judgment. Now what they say is by no means far-fetched, although it does contradict the apparent practice of the early Muslims, since they accepted such reports from trustworthy narrators and transmitted them as authentic.

There are two ways of addressing this problem. The first is that the Followers knew from the proofs of the Law that it is not

permitted to accuse a trustworthy person of lying, especially about the Attributes of God Most High. If [Abū Bakr] al-Ṣiddiq narrated a report saying that he heard the Messenger of God ﷺ say something, to reject that narration would be tantamount to accusing him of lying, whether deliberately or accidentally. Therefore, they accepted such narrations and transmitted them with the formula, "Abū Bakr said that the Messenger of God ﷺ said," or "Anas said that the Messenger of God ﷺ said;" and the generation who came after them did likewise.

However, if they established by the proofs of the Law that it is unacceptable to entertain suspicions about a trusted righteous Companions, why should this mean that the notions of individual men may not be regarded with suspicion, or that conjecture should be afforded the status of the report of a trustworthy man, when *Truly some conjecture is sin* (Qur'ān 49:12)? If the Lawgiver says, "When a trustworthy person gives you a report, you must believe it, accept it, transmit it, and make it known," this in no way means that one could say, "When your souls convey conjectures to you, you must accept them and make them known, and pass on all your ideas and the suggestions of your consciences and souls." That is not what the Law says at all. Therefore, we say that any report on this subject transmitted by an unreliable narrator should be dismissed and not passed on. Greater caution must be taken with this topic than with counsels, parables, and other such things.

The second way of addressing this problem is that the Companions transmitted such reports because they were certain that they had heard them. They reported only what they were certain of, and the Followers accepted it and transmitted it. They did not say, "The Messenger of God ﷺ said such-and-such," but rather said, "So-and-So said that the Messenger of God ﷺ said such-and-such," which was the truth. They did not neglect to transmit them, because every hadith contained benefits aside from the ambiguous

words in it; and even the ambiguous words conveyed true meaning for those who were able to understand them. For such people, it was not a matter of conjecture at all.

For example, the Companions  related that the Messenger of God  said, "Every night, God Most High descends to the lowest heaven and says, 'Will anyone supplicate, that I may answer him? Will anyone ask forgiveness, that I may forgive him... (Muslim 758)?'" The purpose of this hadith is to encourage voluntary prayer at night, and it has a tremendous effect in arousing the desire to perform the *tahajjud* prayer, which is the best act of worship. Had this hadith never been transmitted, that great benefit would have been lost. There is no reason to neglect its transmission, for at most it suggests the notion of "descent" to a child or a layperson with the wit of a child, and it is a simple matter for any intelligent person to sow the seed of transcendence in the heart of the layperson, so that he understands that God is beyond the notion of physical descent. He need do no more than say to him, "If His purpose in descending to the lowest heaven is to allow us to hear His invitation, then the fact is that we do not hear Him, so what is the point in His descending? He could just as well call to us from above the Throne or the highest heaven." This is sufficient to show the layperson that the literal meaning of "descent" here is false. In fact, it resembles a person in the east who wishes to call to a person in the west, so he takes a few steps westwards and then cries out. He knows full well that the other cannot hear him, and so the few steps he took in his direction were completely pointless, the act of a madman. How could any intelligent heart entertain such a notion? This is more than enough to convince the layperson that the literal meaning of "descent" cannot be what is meant here. How could it be, when he knows that corporeality is impossible for God, and that only bodies can move in space, and that literal descent must be a movement?

So, the benefit of transmitting such reports is great, and the harm they pose is easily remedied. How is this in any way comparable to making public the conjectures that occur to one's soul?

We have now covered the arguments regarding the lawfulness of publicizing conjecture-based interpretation, both for and against it. Yet there may also be a third argument: that consideration must be given to the particular situation of the one who asks such questions, and the one to whom he poses them. If the latter knows that the questioner will benefit from it, he may tell him; if he knows that he will be harmed by it, he must not; and if he strongly suspects one or the other, he may act accordingly. Many people are not moved internally by these issues at all, and the literal meaning of such texts do not disturb their souls in the least. To tell such people of these interpretations would only confuse them. But many other people are indeed disturbed by the literal meaning, to the point that they almost think poorly of the Messenger of God ﷺ and reject his ambiguous statements altogether. If such people are told of these conjecture-based interpretations, or even offered any non-literal interpretation at all, they will benefit from this, and so there is no harm in telling them. For them it is a cure for their sickness, though it would cause others to fall sick. But such interpretations should not be preached from the pulpit to the general public, for this would only give rise to concerns which in most of those listening had never been there before, since they had never been bothered by such problems to begin with.

Since the age of the early Muslims was an age of tranquil hearts, they were very much disinclined to engage in interpretation, lest they arouse concerns and confuse hearts. Those who did otherwise at that time were the ones who stirred up turmoil and cast these doubts into people's hearts, though there was no need for it, and so they were guilty of manifest sin. But today, now that such ideas have spread in some lands, one may justifiably make some of these

interpretations known in order to eliminate false illusions from people's hearts, and there is less reason to blame those who do so.

You might say, "You have made a distinction between interpretations that are certain, and interpretations that are merely conjecture. But how can one be certain that a given interpretation is correct?"

The answer is that this requires two things. The first is that the meaning must be definitely true of God Most High, such as "above" in the sense of status. The second is that the word used in the text must have two meanings, and then one of them must be eliminated so that the other is confirmed.

An example of this is found in the words of God Most High, *He is the Dominant above His servants* (Qur'ān 6:18). It is established in lexical convention that the word *fawq* (above) can only mean "higher in location" or "higher in status." It cannot mean "higher in location" here, since it is known that God transcends that, and so nothing remains but "higher in status," in the sense that the master is above the servant, the husband above the wife, or the sultan above the minister. God Most High is above His servants in this respect. This is a matter of certainty regarding the word *fawq*, which is used in the Arabic language in those two senses only.

As for the term *istiwā'*, whether in reference to the heavensⁱ or to the Throne, it may not be possible to confine its lexical usage so narrowly. If it has three meanings, two of which are possible for God and one of which is not, then to favor one of these two meanings over the other can only be either a matter of conjecture or simply arbitrary.

That concludes the examination of interpretation and whether it should be employed or not.

i As in, *Then He turned (istawā) to heaven and leveled them as seven heavens* (Qur'ān 2:29).

(3) The third kind of meddling that must be avoided is alteration (*taṣrīf*). What this means is that if God Most High says *istawā* [employing the perfect tense verb], one must not say *mustawī* [the active participle] or *yastawī* [the present tense verb], because this might change the meaning. To say "He is settled upon the Throne" implies a greater sense of permanence than is implied in His Words, *God is He Who raised up the heavens without pillars that you can see, then settled (istawā) upon the Throne* (Qur'ān 13:2), or *He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth, then turned (istawā) to heaven* (Qur'ān 2:29), since the verses imply an *istiwā'* that was subsequently concluded, in the sense that He turned towards His creation or to the direction of the kingdom by means of the Throne. By altering the morphology of the word, the meanings and possible implications are also altered, and therefore one must avoid that just as one avoids adding to the expression. To alter the morphology is inevitably to add or subtract something from the meaning.

(4) The fourth kind of meddling that must be avoided is analogy (*qiyās*) or inference (*tafrī'*). What this means is that if the word "hand" is used, one must not assert the existence of a forearm, fingers, or palm on the assumption that all these are implied by the presence of a hand. Or if the word "finger" is used, one must not assert the existence of fingernails. Nor is it permitted to affirm a body, flesh, or sinew, even though the usual meaning of "hand" implies these. The most extreme application of this is to affirm a foot when the text says "hand," or a mouth when the text says "eye" or when it speaks of "laughing," or to affirm an ear or eye when the text speaks of "hearing" and "sight." All of these are impossible, false, and extraneous additions. We only mention them at all because some of the more foolhardy anthropomorphists have gone so far as to suggest them.

(5) The fifth kind of meddling is combination (*jam'*) of what was originally separate. Some have strayed so far from God-given success as to have authored compilations of all these reports, devoting a chapter to each limb: a chapter for the head, another for the hand, another for the eye, and so on. Yet these were separate expressions that issued from the Messenger of God ﷺ at different times, far apart, each in differing contexts where those who were present to hear them could understand what they truly meant. If they are compiled in a manner that resembles the physical form of man and presented together all at once, this provides corroboration that strongly suggests an outward resemblance between man and God, and raises in the soul the challenging and disturbing problem of why the Messenger of God ﷺ would have spoken in such a manner when it does not reflect the truth. A single word can be uncertain, but if second, third, and fourth words of the same ilk are added, the uncertainty is lessened by their combination. This is why when something is reported by two or three people, it is more convincing than if only one person reported it. It is why mass-transmitted reports provide a certainty that single reports do not, and why definitive knowledge is established by much corroboration, but not by an isolated statement. Even if the statement of a single trustworthy person could be uncertain, or if every corroboration could be questioned individually, when they are brought together the uncertainty is removed, or at least lessened. This is why it is not permitted to combine things that were originally separate.

(6) The fifth kind of meddling is decontextualization (*tafriq*) of what was originally combined. Just as separate things should not be combined, things that are combined should not be separated. Every word that precedes or follows a given word contributes to its overall meaning, and serves to strengthen a possible meaning in it that would otherwise be weak. If they are separated and considered

in isolation, this meaning is lost. For example, His Words *He is the Dominant above His servants* (Qur'ān 6:18) do not allow anyone to say, "He is above" in a general sense, because the fact that He preceded this by saying *He is the Dominant* implies that the meaning of "above" here is the kind of "above" that exists between dominator and dominated, namely the "above-ness" of status. The word *Dominant* implies this. Indeed, it would not be permitted to say, "He is the Dominant above all others," but only to say, "above His servants," because the mention of servitude when describing those above whom God Most High is Dominant implies that this "above-ness" is due to the master-servant relationship in particular. One can say that the master is "above" the servant, but one cannot say that person X is "above" person Yⁱ before making clear what is the relationship between them: is it one of master and servant, or subjugation, political status, parentage, or marriage?

Yet these are subtleties of which even the learned are unaware, to say nothing of laypeople. Why, then, should laypeople be permitted to engage in such meddling, whether by combining, separating, interpreting, translating, or changing the text in any way? It is due to these subtleties that the early Muslims were so rigid in confining themselves to the text as revealed: in the way it was revealed, and the wording in which it was revealed. And they were right to say so, and correct to view things in this way. Of all things, the most important in which to exercise caution is meddling with the descriptions of the Essence and Attributes of God Most High. The most crucial time to bridle and restrain the tongue from running away is when it is at risk of peril; and what could be more perilous than unbelief?

i The names used here are Zayd and 'Amr, names used in Arabic when describing hypothetical situations, for example in model fatwas (legal rulings).

Sixth Duty: Restraint in Private as Well as in Public

By this I mean holding back from contemplating such matters within oneself. This is a personal obligation, just as it is obligatory to restrain one's tongue from asking or meddling. Of all these duties, this is the weightiest and most difficult. Yet it is obligatory, just as an infirm man is obliged not to dive into the deep sea, even if his natural desire is to plunge into it to extract its pearls and treasures. He must not let their great value beguile him into forgetting that he is entirely unable to obtain them. He must remember his incapacity and how dangerous it would be for him to seek them, and keep in mind that that even if he misses out on the treasures of the sea, they are nothing but extraneous comforts of life which he can do without; but if he drowns or is gobbled up by a crocodile, he will lose life itself.

You might say, "But what is a person to do if he cannot stop his heart from thinking about such things and desiring to delve into them?"

My answer is that the way for him is to devote himself to worship of God Most Glorious with prayer, recitation of the Qur'ān, and invocation. If he cannot, then he should pursue some other science that is unrelated to this topic such as language, grammar, mathematics, medicine, or jurisprudence. If he cannot do that either, then a craft or trade, even if it be plowing or weaving. If he cannot do that, then a game or distraction. If he cannot do that, then he should remind himself of the horrors of the Resurrection and the Reckoning. Any of those other things would be better than diving into that fathomless sea fraught with terrible perils and harms. Indeed, it might even be safer for a layman to engage in bodily sins than to delve into the pursuit of knowledge of God Most High; for the consequence of sin is iniquity, whereas the consequence of doing that would be idolatry; and *God forgives not that any*

partner be attributed to Him, but He forgives anything but that for whomever He will (Qur'ān 4:116).

You might say, "But if the layperson cannot feel content with religious doctrines unless he has evidence for them, is it permitted to provide him with the evidence? If you say that it is allowed, this means you are permitting him to engage in contemplation and speculation. But what is the difference between that kind of speculation and any other? If you say that it is not allowed, then how can you deny him the only thing that will make his faith sound?"

The answer is that I permit him to hear the evidence for the existence and oneness of the Creator, and the truthfulness of the Messenger ﷺ and the Last Day, but only if two conditions are met. The first is that he be presented with no more than the arguments found in the Qur'ān. The second is that if there is any debate, it should be on a superficial level; the level of his contemplation must be shallow and transparent, not profound and obscure, and he should not delve into the deepest reaches of the subject. The proofs for these four things are provided in the Qur'ān.

(1) The proof of the Creator's existence is found in such verses as: Say, 'Who provides for you from the sky and the earth? Who has power over hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living from the dead, and brings forth the dead from the living? Who directs every affair?' They will say, 'God' (Qur'ān 10:36); Have they not looked at the sky above them, how We have built it and adorned it, and how it has no rifts? And the earth We have spread out, and cast in it firm mountains, and caused every delightful kind to grow therein; an insight and a reminder for every penitent servant. And We send down from the sky blessed water, and grow with it gardens and grain for harvest, and lofty date palms with clustered fruit, as provision for Our servants (Qur'ān 50:6-11); So let man consider his food: We pour down water plenteously, then cleave the earth into fissures, and in it grow grain, and vines and herbs,

and olives and date palms, and lush orchards, and fruits and pastures, as provision for you and your livestock (Qur'ān 80:24-32); Have We not made the earth a floor, and the mountains pegs? We created you in pairs, and made your sleep for rest, and made the night a cloak, and made the day for livelihood, and built above you seven firmaments, and made a radiant lamp, and sent down water pouring from the clouds, thereby to bring forth grains and plants, and luxuriant gardens (Qur'ān 78:6-16); and so on. There are almost five hundred such verses, which I compiled in Jawāhir al-Qur'ān (The Jewels of the Qur'ān).

It is through the like of this that mankind ought to know the majesty and magnificence of God the Creator, rather than in the language of the theologians, who say, "Accidents are temporal, and substances cannot be without temporal accidents; and if something cannot be without temporal accidents it must itself be temporal; and every temporal thing requires something to bring it into existence." Such categorizations and premises, affirmed by means of logical constructions, will only confuse the hearts of laypeople, while the evident and easily understandable proofs offered by the Qur'ān will convince them and make their souls tranquil, planting unshakeable faith in their hearts.

(2) Convincing proof of His oneness is also found in the Qur'ān when He says, *Had there been gods other than God in the two realms, both would have surely gone to ruin (Qur'ān 21:22).* If there were two directors, the direction would be ruined. Or again, He says, *Had there been other gods beside Him, as they say, they would surely have sought a way to the Lord of the Throne (Qur'ān 17:42); God has not taken any child, nor are there any gods alongside Him, for then each god would take away what he created, and some of them would rise up over others (Qur'ān 23:91).*

(3) The truthfulness of the Messenger ﷺ is proven by God's Words: *Say, 'If mankind and jinn banded together to produce the*

like of this Qur'ān, they could never produce the like of it, no matter how they supported one another' (Qur'ān 17:88); And if you are in doubt concerning what We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a sūra like it (Qur'ān 2:23); and Then bring ten sūras like it, fabricated (Qur'ān 11:13).

(4) [The reality of] the Last Day is proven by His Words, Exalted is He: He sets forth a similitude for Us, and forgets his own creation; he says, 'Who will give life to bones when they are rotten?' Say, 'He Who originated them the first time will give them life, and He knows every creation' (Qur'ān 36:78-79); Does man suppose that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a drop of semen emitted? Then he was a clot, and He created and proportioned, and made of it the pair, male and female. Is such a one not able to revive the dead? (Qur'ān 75:36-40); O mankind, if you are in doubt about the Resurrection, We created you from dust, then from a drop, then from a clot, then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed, that We may make clear to you. And We cause what We will to remain in the wombs for a term appointed, then We bring you forth as infants, that you then may come of age. And some of you die, and some of you are relegated to the most abject stage of life, so that after having knowledge they know nothing. And you see the earth barren, yet when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells, and gives forth plants of every delightful kind. That is because God is the Truth, and because He revives the dead, and because He has power over all things (Qur'ān 22:5-6). There are many similar verses in the Qur'ān, and there is no need to add anything more.

You might say, "But these are the proofs on which the theologians rely, having established their congruity. What basis is there for barring them from all other proofs except these ones, but not from these ones too? After all, every proof requires the use of discursive reasoning and contemplation to understand it. If the

door to discursive reasoning is opened for the layperson, then it must be opened all the way, or else shut altogether, so that he is obliged to conform blindly without considering the proof at all."

The answer to this is that some proofs require a degree of contemplation and scrutiny that exceeds the capacity of the average layperson, but other proofs are plain and intuitive and can be understood with the slightest bit of reflection, such that all people are able to grasp them. If a proof may be understood by anyone easily, there is no harm in it. If a proof requires scrutiny, it may be beyond the limits of some. The proofs of the Qur'ān are like food, which is good for everyone, while the proofs of the theologians are like medicine, which is good for some but bad for most. Or again: the proofs of the Qur'ān are like water, which is good for the nursing infant and the full-grown man alike, while all other proofs are like foods, which sometimes benefit adults, but other times make them sick, and which do not benefit infants at all. This is why we said that the layperson must listen to the proofs of the Qur'ān as he would listen to any plain speech, and discuss them only in a superficial manner, rather than burdening himself with overly elaborate contemplation or profound analysis.

An example of a patent proof is that if a person is able to do something for the first time, he is all the more able to do it a second time. As God Most High says: *And He it is Who originates creation, then repeats it; and for Him that is most easy* (Qur'ān 30:27). Another example is how He says, *Had there been gods other than God in the two realms, both would have surely gone to ruin* (Qur'ān 21:22): the direction of a single house cannot be carried out properly if there are two directors, so how could it be done with the entire universe? Another plain argument is that the one who creates must have knowledge, as He says: *Could He Who created not know?* (Qur'ān 67:14). For laypeople, these proofs are like water, from which God created every living thing.

As for what the theologians invented beyond this, in the form of scrutinizing issues by framing problems and then solving them, it is an innovation that poses obvious harm to most people, and therefore it should be treated with circumspection. The proof that it poses harm to people is a matter of firsthand witnessing and experience, and also the many tribulations that have broken out among people ever since the theologians emerged and the art of theology became widespread, whereas the first era of the Companions ﷺ was entirely free of such things. It is also proven by the fact that neither the Messenger of God ﷺ nor any of the Companions employed the methods of the theologians for categorizing and scrutinizing arguments. And this was not because they were unable to do so; had they deemed it beneficial, they would have engaged in it at length, and embarked upon the examination of arguments even more deeply than they did with the complicated business of the laws of estate division.

You might say, "The only reason they refrained from doing so was that there was no need, since heretical innovations did not come until later, which was when the dire need arose for it. The science of theology was established in order to treat those who were sick with heresy; and since there were few heresies in their time, they had little need to seek out ways of curing them."

The answer to this has two aspects. The first is that when it came to the laws of estate division, they did not simply confine themselves to passing judgment over issues as they arose. On the contrary, they took pains to come up with as many hypothetical situations as they could, even if such scenarios were highly unlikely ever to occur. If an occurrence was in any way possible, they examined it and worked out what the ruling on it would be. They did so because they knew there was no harm in delving into this subject, or in explaining the ruling before it was needed. Refuting heresy and uprooting it from people's souls is certainly more important

than that, yet they did not take it up as an art, which can only have been because they recognized that it would do more harm than good. They must have been warned about it, and been made to understand that it is forbidden to delve into it.

The second aspect is that they were certainly in need of arguments to employ against the Jews and Christians to argue for the Prophethood of Muḥammad ﷺ, or to argue for the existence of God against the idolaters, or to argue for the Resurrection against those who denied it. Yet although these matters are the foundations of all doctrine, they did not go beyond the arguments of the Qur'ān. If people were convinced by them, they accepted them; if not, they fought them. Once the proofs of the Qur'ān had been made widespread, they resorted to the sword and the spear. They did not take up the mantle of debate by establishing rational syllogisms, arranging premises and conclusions, and refining the methods and customs of disputation. They knew that this would only cause tribulation and confusion, and that a person who cannot be convinced by the proofs of the Qur'ān will only be convinced by the sword and spear; for after the argument of God Most High, there is no other argument.

That said, we will be fair and concede that the need for treatment does grow as the illness worsens, and that the passage of time and increasing remoteness of the Prophetic era did result in the emergence of more and more problems. There are two methods to treat such problems. The first is to engage in argument and demonstration, with the awareness that what cures one person might corrupt two others. Such treatments are only beneficial for the intelligent, and are harmful to the unintelligent; but how rare are intelligent people, and how common are foolish ones! It is better to see to the needs of the many. The second method is the way of the early Muslims, which is to be restrained and silent, and to resort to the whip, the lash, and the sword; for that will convince the majority,

though not the minority. The proof of this is that when unbelievers are taken prisoner of war and made slaves, they accept Islam under the shade of swords, but then continue to practice it until it becomes willing, though at first it was unwilling; it becomes true conviction, though at first it was contentious and doubtful. That is what happens when they spend time among adherents of the religion and become comfortable with them, and they hear the Word of God Most High and behold the righteous. Contextual proofs of this order are much more suited to their nature than debates and arguments are.

Now since each of these methods of treatment is better for some people than others, it is necessary to give precedence to the one that benefits the majority. Those who lived alongside the Prime Physician—aided by the Holy Spirit, given hidden knowledge from the Divine Presence, and inspired with revelation from the All-Aware, the All-Seeing of the secrets and inner beings of His servants—certainly knew which method was most correct and beneficial. The best course of action is undoubtedly to follow their example.

Seventh Duty: Deferring to the People of Knowledge

What this means is that the layperson must believe that even if the true meanings and secrets of these outward expressions are unknown to him, they were not unknown to the Messenger of God ﷺ, nor to [Abū Bakr] al-Ṣiddiq and the major Companions, nor to the saints and firmly-rooted people of knowledge. He must accept that they are only unknown to him because they are beyond his capacity. He should not hold others to his own standard. Angels are not comparable to blacksmiths; and if a poor man's coffers are empty, that does not mean that the king's treasuries are too. Mankind was created diverse and of varying degrees. Consider

the mines that contain gold, silver, and other precious metals, and how they differ in form, color, properties, and value. Just so, hearts are mines containing the jewels of knowledge. Some are mines of Prophethood, sainthood, knowledge, and gnosis of God Most High. Others are mines of bestial appetites and demonic traits.

This is obvious when you consider how people differ in their aptitude for arts and crafts. Thanks to his skilled hand and artistry, one man is able to do things that another could never even hope to begin, much less to master, even if he spent his whole life studying it. The same applies to knowledge of God.

Likewise, some people are naturally timid and incapable, scarcely able to look upon the crashing waves of the sea even when standing upon the shore. Others are able to do that, but cannot bring themselves to wade into its water, even if they remain standing upright. Others can manage that, but cannot lift their feet from the ground to swim. Others can swim in the shallows, but cannot venture out into the deep and perilous waters. Others can do that, but cannot dive beneath the water to reach the deepest recesses where the treasures of the sea lie. So, it is with the sea of knowledge, in which the hierarchy among mankind is just the same.

You might say, "Does this mean that the gnostics possess total knowledge of God Most High, such that nothing is hidden from them?" To which I answer: Of course not! I have demonstrated unequivocally in my book *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ Asmā' Allāh al-Husnā* (The Loftiest Objective: A Commentary on the Most Beautiful Names of God) that no one knows God as He truly is except for God Himself; and that although created beings know much, when compared to the knowledge of God Most High they have been given only a little knowledge. However, it should be known that the Divine Presence encompasses everything in existence, for there is nothing in existence but God Most High and His Acts. Everything is from the Divine Presence, just as every agent

of the state—the army, police and others—is part of the sultan's presence. You can only understand the Divine Presence through the example of the sultan's presence.

Know that everything in existence is within the Divine Presence. However, the sultan has a private palace in his kingdom, and a courtyard within the grounds of his palace. That courtyard has a threshold where the subjects gather, not being permitted to go beyond the threshold or onto the edge of the courtyard. However, the most important citizens of the nation are permitted to cross the threshold and enter the courtyard and sit there, their proximity to the palace being determined by their status. Perhaps the minister alone is permitted to enter the palace itself, whereupon the sultan selects some of the secrets of the kingdom to share with him, although he withholds other things from him.

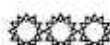
This example should allow you to understand how people differ in their proximity to the Divine Presence. The threshold at the end of the courtyard is where the masses congregate, and they cannot pass by it. If they attempt to pass beyond their limit, they must be rebuked and punished. As for the people of knowledge, they are the ones who are allowed to pass by the threshold and enter the courtyard, where they may roam within different boundaries, some nearer to the palace than others. There is much disparity among them, although they are equal inasmuch as they are allowed to cross the threshold and go ahead of the masses, who must remain by the door. As for the Enclosure of Holiness (*Ḥaṣirat al-Quds*),ⁱ in

i Ghazālī says in *Mishkāt al-anwār*: "No one may draw near to God without standing in the midst of the Enclosure of Holiness. The realm that is elevated beyond the reach of sense-perception and imagination is what we mean by the World of Holiness. When we consider it in its entirety, such that nothing may leave it and nothing foreign to it may enter it, we call it the Enclosure of Holiness. We might also call the human spirit, which is the channel of the glimmers of Holiness, the Holy Valley. This Enclosure comprises lesser pastures, some of which are more fully imbued with the meanings of Holiness than others, but the word "enclosure" embraces all of its gradations."

the center of the courtyard, it is too high for the feet of the people of knowledge to reach, too lofty for them even to see. Anyone who laid eyes upon it would look away dazzled and bewildered, and then his sight would return to him *humbled and defeated* (Qur'ān 67:4). This is what the layperson must believe in general terms, even if he does not understand the details.



Those, then, are the seven duties that ordinary people must observe regarding reports such as those you asked about; and such was the true way of the early Muslims. Let us now go about proving that their way is indeed the right way.





CHAPTER 2

PROVING THAT THE WAY OF THE EARLY MUSLIMS IS THE TRUTH

There are two proofs for this: one based on reason, the other on tradition. The rational proof actually comprises two proofs, one being general and the other detailed.

The General Rational Proof

The general proof that the way of the early Muslims is the truth is revealed by considering four principles which any intelligent person must accept.

(1) The first principle is that of all creation, the one who knew best what ensures salvation for mankind was the Prophet ﷺ. For it is not possible to determine what is good or bad for the Hereafter by means of experimentation, as is done for medicine, since empirical sciences depend upon repeated observation—and who has ever gone to that world and then returned with news of what is good or bad for it? Nor can it be ascertained by intellectual analogy, for the intellect falls short of it, and all intelligent people agree that the mind cannot be guided to what comes after death, nor to the way in which sin is harmful and obedience beneficial,

especially when it comes to the specific details that are provided by Revelation. All of them admit that this can only be perceived by the light of Prophethood, which is a power that lies beyond the power of the mind, by means of which certain matters of the unseen pertaining to the past and the future can be apprehended in a manner that differs from the way in which the mind apprehends things. Even the ancient philosophers agreed with this, to say nothing of the saints and people of firmly-rooted knowledge, who can do no more than borrow from this Prophetic presence, which they acknowledge to be beyond all other faculties.

(2) The second principle is that the Prophet ﷺ conveyed to mankind all that was revealed to him concerning their welfare in the Hereafter as well as the world, and that he did not withhold or conceal any of this Revelation from humanity. This was the purpose for which he was sent, and so he was a mercy to the worlds and was above reproach. This can be known definitively by examining the circumstances of his life, his eagerness to ensure the wellbeing of humanity, and his desire to guide them to what was best for them in this life and the Next. He did not leave anything that leads mankind nearer to Paradise and the approval of their Creator without showing it to them, enjoining it upon them, and encouraging them to pursue it. Nor did he leave anything that leads them nearer to Hell and the wrath of God Most high without warning them of it and forbidding it to them. This applies to both knowledge and action.

(3) The third principle is that the people who best understood the meaning of what the Prophet ﷺ said, and who were best positioned to grasp its truths and secrets, were those who saw the Revelation come down and lived, and who were his contemporaries and Companions. They remained with him night and day, always ready to understand the meaning of his words and to receive them by acting upon them first, and then conveying them

to those who came after them second. They were eager to draw nearer to God Most High by hearing, understanding, memorizing, and disseminating all that he said; and indeed, the Messenger of God ﷺ encouraged them to do so, saying, "May God give radiance to (*naḍḍara*) any man who hears my words, remembers them, and conveys them just as he heard them" (Abū Dāwūd 3652). Upon my word, could the Messenger of God ﷺ be accused of concealing it from them? Far be it for the station of Prophethood to do so! Or could those eminent people be accused of failing to understand his words and intentions, or of concealing them after understanding them, or of opposing him by acting contrary to them out of pride, even after acknowledging his teachings and edicts? No intelligent person could even consider such things.

(4) The fourth principle is that throughout their era until the ends of their lives, they never told people to engage in critical examination, evaluation, or interpretation, or to expose themselves to any of these things. On the contrary, they rebuked those who dived into it, asked about it, or spoke about it, as we shall relate later. If that were part of the religion or within the sphere of the religion's epistemology, they would have engaged in it by night and day, and encouraged their children and families to do the same. They would have set about founding its principles and expanding upon its laws even more industriously than they did for the principles of the laws of estate division and inheritance.

Given these four principles, it is obvious that what they said was the truth, and that their intention was the correct one, especially as the Messenger of God ﷺ praised them and said, "The best of mankind are my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them" (Bukhārī 2652).

He also said, "My Community will divide into seventy-odd sects, one of which will be saved." Someone asked, "Who are they?" He replied, "The people of the Sunna and the Majority." Someone asked,

"What is the people of the Sunna and the Majority?" He replied, "It is what I and my Companions stand upon" (Bukhārī 2652).

The Detailed Rational Proof

The second proof is the detailed one, which is as follows. We have claimed that the truth lies in the way of the early Muslims, and that their way was to encourage the masses to hold to the aforementioned seven duties regarding the outward meaning of ambiguous texts; and we have provided proofs for each duty, showing them to be true. If anyone would wish to oppose this, I would like to know what exactly he would oppose.

Is it our first statement, namely that the layperson must affirm God's transcendence beyond corporeality or anthropomorphism? Or is it our second statement, namely that he must have belief and faith in what the Messenger ﷺ said, with whatever meaning he intended? Or is it the third, namely that he must acknowledge his inability to apprehend the true meaning of those expressions? Or is it the fourth, namely that he must be silent and refrain from asking or delving into what is beyond his capacity? Or is it the fifth, namely that he must restrain his tongue from altering the outward meanings, whether by adding, subtracting, combining, or decontextualizing? Or is it the sixth, namely that he must restrain his heart from contemplating them if he is unable to grasp them, given that they were told, "Contemplate the creation of God, but do not contemplate the Essence of God"? Or is it the seventh, namely that he must defer to the people of knowledge: the Prophets, saints, and people of deeply-rooted knowledge?

We have provided explanations and proofs for all of these duties, and no rational person—to say nothing of an intellectual or scholar—could possibly deny or refute them. These, then, are the rational proofs.

The Traditional Proof

The second approach is recourse to tradition (*sama'*), which may be outlined as follows. The proof that the position of the early Muslims is the correct one is that the contrary position is an innovation, and innovation is blameworthy and errant. For laypeople to engage in interpretation, and for learned people to drag them into it, is innovation, and therefore the opposite, which is to abstain from it, must be praiseworthy and faithful to the Sunna.

We have here three premises: (1) examining and enquiring into such matters is innovation; (2) every innovation is blameworthy; (3) if innovation is blameworthy then its opposite, the long-established Sunna, must be praiseworthy. None of these premises can be disputed; and if they are admitted, then it can only follow that the position of the early Muslims is the right one.

You might say, "But how would you refute someone who asserted that innovation is not blameworthy, or that such examination is not innovation, thereby denying the first two premises but not the third, since it is obvious?"

Our reply is that the proof of the first premise, namely that innovation is blameworthy, is the agreement of the entire Community that innovation is blameworthy and that a known innovator must be rebuked and condemned. This is simply an axiomatic truth of religion, not something that is open to conjecture. The fact that the Messenger of God ﷺ condemned innovation is known by mass-transmission through several reports which together constitute definitive knowledge, even if certain of them could be subject to doubt when viewed in isolation. This is akin to our knowledge of the courage of 'Alī عليه السلام, the generosity of Hātim,ⁱ the

i A pre-Islamic Arab tribal chieftain whose chivalry and generosity were proverbial.

Prophet's ﷺ love for 'Ā'isha رضي الله عنها, and other such matters. They are definitively known though a collection of individual reports that together constitute a body of transmission so large that it simply could not be that all those who narrated them were lying, even if none of the individual reports were mass-transmitted.

For example, consider the narration from the Messenger of God ﷺ, "Hold to my Sunna and the Sunna of the rightly-guided Caliphs who come after me. Bite down upon it with your teeth! Beware of newly-invented things, for every new thing is an innovation, and every innovation is an error, and every error is in Hell" (Abū Dāwūd 4599). He ﷺ also said, "Follow, do not innovate.² Those who came before you were only ruined because they innovated in their religion, left the ways of their Prophets, and adopted their own opinions. They went astray, and they led others astray."³ He ﷺ also said, "When a worker of innovation dies, it is a victory for Islam."⁴ He ﷺ also said, "When someone goes to a worker of innovation to pay him respect, he is helping to demolish Islam."⁵ He ﷺ also said, "When someone turns away from a worker of innovation, detesting him for the sake of God Most High, God fills his heart with security and faith. When someone rebukes a worker of innovation, God Most High lifts him one hundred degrees. When someone greets a worker of innovation, or meets him with good cheer, or receives him in a manner that pleases him, he thereby degrades what God sent down upon Muḥammad ﷺ."⁶ He ﷺ also said, "God Most High does not accept prayer or fasting from a worker of innovation, nor zakat, pilgrimage, visitation, jihad, repentance, or ransom. He leaves Islam like an arrow passing through its target, or a hair pulled from dough" (Ibn Mājah 51). These and other such narrations, which are almost beyond counting, constitute unequivocal knowledge that innovation is blameworthy.

You might say, "We admit that innovation is blameworthy, but what is the proof for the second premise, namely that these issues

are innovation, or that innovation means any new thing? Why did al-Shāfiʿī رحمہ اللہ say that holding the *tarāwīḥ*ⁱ prayer in congregation is an innovation, but a good innovation? What about all the technical terms that the jurists have invented to aid them in their scholarly arguments, and all the arts of debate that they employ?ⁱⁱ All of this is innovated, and none of it was related from the Companions. This implies that blameworthy innovation means an innovation which displaces an established teaching of the Sunna; and we do not admit that this issue is one such innovation. It is true that it is a new thing in which the first generations did not engage, but that may have been because they were engaged in something more important, or because people's hearts at that time were free from such doubts and misgivings, so that they had no need to engage in it. But later on, when heresies and innovations arose and there was need to refute them and silence those who propagated them, people began to engage in it."

The response to this is that your definition of "blameworthy innovation" as "any new thing that displaces a teaching of the long-established Sunna" is correct; but in fact, this innovation did indeed displace a teaching of the long-established Sunna, for the way of the Companions was to forbid delving into it and to rebuke those who asked about it with strenuous chastisement and condemnation. To open the door to enquiring into these matters, and drawing common people into the mire of these confusing issues, is contrary to what was mass-transmitted from the Companions رحمہم اللہ; the Followers related this from them in such large numbers, through mass-transmission of reports as well as the biographies

i The special night prayers held in Ramaḍān.

ii The author lists a few examples of such technical terms here: *naqd*, *kasr*, *fasād wadʿ*, *fasād tarkib*, and *taʿdiya*. Explanations of these terms may be found in works of juristic fundamentals, or in reference works such as Jurjānī's *Taʿrifāt*, but they need not be expounded on here. The author's point is that the early Muslims did not employ such terms.

of the early Muslims, that it is simply not possible to doubt it. Conversely, it is mass-transmitted fact that they did delve into issues of estate division and intricate discussions of matters of jurisprudence, and this too is known to us by so many individual reports that there can be no doubt about their common thrust, even if taken individually they might be subject to doubt, just as we said earlier regarding the condemnation of innovation.

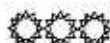
For example, it is related that a man asked 'Umar ؓ about two ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān, and in response he struck him with his whip. It is also narrated that someone once asked him whether or not the Qur'ān is created. As Abū Hurayra told it: "I was sitting with him when he was asked about this; he was the Commander of the Faithful at the time. 'Umar was astounded by what he said, and led him by the hand to 'Alī ؓ and said, 'Abū Hasan, listen to what this man says!' He replied, 'What does he say, Commander of the Faithful?' The man said, 'I asked him whether the Qur'ān is created or uncreated.' 'Alī ؓ was so repulsed by this that he lowered his head in silence for a while, and then raised it and said, 'This fellow's kind of talk will herald the last days [of this world]. If I had the power over him that you do, I would have his head!'" Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal narrated this hadith on the authority of Abū Hurayra.

That is what 'Alī ؓ said of this questioner in the presence of 'Umar and Abū Hurayra, may God be pleased with them all; and they did not say to him, nor did any of the other Companions who heard of it say, nor did 'Alī ؓ think to himself: "This is a question about a religious matter, an attempt to know better the nature of the Word of God Most High. This man wished to know about the attribute of the Qur'ān, which is the miracle that proves the truthfulness of the Messenger ﷺ and indeed is the proof by which the laws of religious responsibility are known. Why should someone who seeks the truth and asks after it be treated so harshly?"

Behold how foresighted ‘Alī ؑ was, and how he saw that this would open the door to turmoil, and how it would spread at the End of Time, which will be the season of tribulations, as the Messenger of God ﷺ foretold. Behold how severe he was, and how he said, “If I had the power over him that you do, I would have his head!” Such were the great masters who witnessed the Revelation being sent down and were aware of the innermost secrets and truths of the religion. The Messenger of God ﷺ said of one of them, “Had I not been sent, it would have been you, ‘Umar.”⁷ Of the other, he said, “I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Alī is its gate.”⁸ These great masters discouraged people from asking such questions, while those who came later—people obsessed with theology and debate, people who could spend all the riches of the world and yet not equal even half the measure of such men—claim that the right thing to do is to accept such questions and engage in answering them, and to throw this door open. What is more, they believe that they are right and ‘Umar ؓ and ‘Alī ؑ were wrong. How utterly absurd! It is truly a fruitless and impious endeavor to compare angels to blacksmiths, or to prefer professional debaters to rightly-guided imams and righteous predecessors.

It is therefore decisively established that this is an innovation that contradicts the way of the early Muslims. It is distinct from how the jurists delved into the minutiae of legal issues, since although that was new, it did not contradict the way of the early Muslims. It is not related that they ever discouraged doing it; on the contrary, their detailed examination of the laws of estate division indicates that they would have permitted such enquiries. As for the arts of debate that were invented, they are also held to be a blameworthy innovation by those who understand the truth. I have explained the sense in which they are blameworthy in the Book of the Fundamentals of Doctrine in *Ḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of Religious Sciences).

As for scholarly debate, if it is done for the purpose of cooperating in the search for the proper implementation of the Law then it is in conformity with the way of the early Muslims. They would consult with one another and discuss legal matters, as they did with issues such as how inheritance law applies to the grandfather, or to the mother when the spouse or father of the deceased is still alive, and other such questions. It is true that the jurists innovated expressions and terms in order to express their correct ideas, but that is not problematic; on the contrary, it is permitted for all to borrow and make use of such terms. But if the intention behind a debate is only to silence and defeat the opponent, rather than to teach and learn, that is a blameworthy innovation which contradicts the established teaching of the Sunna.





CHAPTER 3

VARIOUS USEFUL POINTS AND QUESTIONS RELEVANT TO THIS SUBJECT

Why Do These Ambiguous Expressions Occur in the Tradition?

Someone might ask: "But why did the Messenger of God ﷺ feel the need to use such ambiguous expressions in the first place, since there was no need for them? Did he not know that they would imply a resemblance between God and creation, and that people would misunderstand them and stray into false beliefs about God's Essence and Attributes because of them? Far be it from the status of Prophethood to be unaware of such a thing! Or is it that he knew all that, but simply did not care if some people were ignorant or errant? That is even more outrageous and heinous; he was sent to proclaim and explain the religion, not to deliver vague suggestions and riddles. Indeed, this problem has had an impact on some hearts, to such a degree that some people even think badly of him and say, 'If he were a Prophet, he would know God Most High; and if he knew God, he would not describe Him in ways that are impossible for His Essence and Attributes.' Others incline toward believing in the literal meaning, and say, 'If it were not true, he would not

have said it that way. He would have used some other expression, or added context to avoid implying the wrong thing.' What is the way to solve this problem, which has had a serious effect on some people's hearts and disquieted their souls?"

The answer is that for people of inner vision this problem is already solved. The solution is that the Messenger of God ﷺ did not utter all of these expressions at once, but it was those who incline towards anthropomorphism who compiled them. We noted earlier that compiling them is what causes such misgivings and misunderstandings to arise, while mentioning them in isolation does not. They are merely expressions that the Messenger of God ﷺ casually uttered from time to time throughout his life. If they are reduced only to those expressions that occur in the Qur'ān or in mass-transmitted narrations, they amount to no more than a few words. If authentic [but not mass-transmitted] narrations are added, there are still only a few. They only become more numerous with the addition of aberrant and weak narrations that ought to be disregarded.

Furthermore, the mass-transmitted or authentic reports conveyed by trusted narrators are isolated sayings, for each of which the Prophet ﷺ provided a context and indications that divest them of any suggestion of anthropomorphism. Those who were present were well aware of this. It is only when those words are taken out of context that confusion arises. The greatest of all the clarifying contexts that dispel this confusion is prior knowledge of God Most High's transcendence beyond the literal meaning of all these expressions. Anyone who is already aware of this will hold this knowledge with him as a treasure firmly implanted in his soul, providing a context for all that he hears. The confusion will be entirely dispelled for him, leaving no room for doubt. This can be illustrated with some examples.

(1) The Prophet ﷺ called the Ka'ba the House of God Most High. A child or someone with a childlike mind could take this to mean that the Ka'ba is literally where God resides, but the laypeople who believe that God is in Heaven, settled upon the Throne, do not even suspect this to be the case. Suppose that one was to ask them, "Why did the Messenger of God ﷺ feel the need to use such a confusing expression, which seems to imply that the Ka'ba is the dwelling-place of God?" Naturally, they would all reply that only a child or an idiot would think such a thing. No one who has heard many times that God is settled upon the Throne will even entertain the suspicion that it means that the Ka'ba is His literal home. Rather, he will know without a second thought that calling it His House is a way of honoring it, or that it has some meaning other than the literal one. The layperson believes that He is upon the Throne; is that not a clarifying context which provides him with definitive knowledge that the Ka'ba cannot be His house in a literal sense? Only someone who does not have that belief to begin with would entertain that notion.

Likewise, when the Messenger of God ﷺ uttered these expressions, he was speaking to people who already knew of the divine transcendence and incomparability, who knew that God transcends corporeality and all that it implies. For them, this knowledge provided context that unequivocally discounted such notions and left no room for doubt, although some of them may have been uncertain as to how to interpret what those expressions truly meant, since they had several possible meanings that befitted the Majesty of God Most High.

(2) When a jurist uses the word *ṣūra* ("image", "form", "appearance", etc.) in the presence of a child or layperson, and speaks about the form of an issue or the appearance of an event, or says, "I have depicted the issue in the best possible way," the child or layperson who does not understand what an "issue" is might suppose that

he is speaking about something that has a visible appearance, a face with a nose, mouth, and eyes, since that is the more usual meaning of the word with which he is familiar. But someone who knows the true meaning of the term "issue" will recognize that it actually means a collection of information organized in a particular way. Could he possibly imagine that an issue has a face with a nose, mouth, and eyes, like the image that bodies have? Of course not. He is well aware that an issue transcends corporeality and all that it implies.

The same is true when it comes to awareness of the Divine transcendence of corporeality; and this awareness was present in the hearts of all those who heard such expressions, providing a qualifying context for the true meaning of "image" in his words, "God created Adam in His own image." Anyone who is aware that God transcends corporeality would be baffled by the notion that there are those who believe that God Most High has a corporeal image, just as anyone who knows what an "issue" is would be baffled at the notion that it could have a physical appearance.

(3) If someone says in the presence of a child, "Baghdad is in the Caliph's hand," the child might imagine that the Caliph is holding it between his fingers, clutching it in his palm like a piece of clay. The same would be true of any layperson who has never heard of Baghdad. But those who know that Baghdad is a great city would never even think of such a thing. Imagine that someone said to you, "Why did you say that Baghdad is in the Caliph's hand? This implies something false and untrue, for it might make someone think that he is holding Baghdad in his fingers!" To such an objection one could do not more than reply, "Bless your heart! Only someone who does not know what Baghdad really is could imagine such a thing. Anyone familiar with the city would know for certain that this 'hand' cannot be a physical limb composed

of a palm and fingers, but that it must mean something else. This knowledge is the only context he needs in order to understand."

The same applies to all such expressions narrated in the Tradition. Any wayward implications they might have can be repelled by one single clarifying context: knowledge of God Most High, and knowledge that He is not a body, nor of the class of bodies. This was something that the Messenger of God ﷺ had already made clear from the beginning of his mission, before he ever uttered such expressions.

(4) The Messenger of God ﷺ said to the women of his household, "The one of you with the longest arm will be the first to join me [in death]" (Muslim 2452). Some of them took this to mean physical length and began comparing their arms, until they were informed that this was a reference to forbearance and generosity, not the length of the limb. The Messenger of God ﷺ used this expression in a context that made clear that generosity is what was meant by "long arm," but when the phrase was taken out of context, the misunderstanding arose. Could anyone justly object to the Messenger of God's ﷺ use of an expression with which some of them were unfamiliar? He did no more than use an expression that was made understandable to those present by the additional context of the mention of generosity.

A narrator might transmit the expression exactly as he hears it, but not transmit the context; or it might not be possible for him to transmit it; or else he might think that there is no need to do so because anyone who heard it would understand it just as he did when he heard it. He might not realize that he only understood it because he possessed the necessary context, and might limit himself to the expression alone as a result. It is for reasons such as these that expressions come to be taken out of context, and hence misunderstood. Nevertheless, awareness of the divine transcendence is sufficient on its own to dispel all these misunderstandings, though

it might not be enough to ascertain what the intended meaning of the expression actually is. These details must be afforded due attention.

(5) If someone says in the presence of a child or someone with a childlike mind who does not have experience of social customs in gatherings, "So-and-So went into the assembly and sat above So-and-So," the poor fool might imagine that he sat right upon his head, or in a position above his head. However, someone familiar with social customs and aware that the status of a seat is higher the nearer it is to the front will understand that he sat near the other man—not above his head, but closer to the front. The person who utters this expression is addressing people who are familiar with social customs, and it would be false and baseless to object to his choice of words on the grounds that children or fools would not understand him.

One could give countless further examples, but these few ought to suffice, since anyone unconvinced by them will only become more stubbornly ignorant if offered more. From these examples you will understand unequivocally that these plain expressions are diverted from their literal meaning by mere context, and that this context is based on prior knowledge and understanding. In the same way, the suggestive expressions that occur in these texts were diverted away from their literal meanings by many contexts. Some of these contexts were matters of common knowledge, one crucial example being their knowledge that they were not commanded to worship idols, and that to worship a body is to worship an idol, whether the body be small or large, ugly or beautiful, base or sublime, on earth or upon the Throne. The incorporeality of God, and all that this implies, was a matter of definitive knowledge among them all thanks to the teachings of the Messenger of God ﷺ and the stress placed on the divine transcendence in texts such as *Nothing is like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing* (Qur'ān 42:11); And

there is none comparable to Him (Qur'ān 112:4); *So do not set up counterparts to God, knowingly* (Qur'ān 2:22), and countless expressions and definitive clarifications too numerous to mention. It was a matter of unquestionable fact. That was sufficient for them to recognize the impossibility of a "hand" in the sense of a limb composed of flesh and bone, or any other kind of body, and the same with other such expressions that would usually denote corporeality and all that it implies when used in an unqualified sense. If such an expression is used to describe something that is not a body, it can only be that it is not meant literally. It must mean something else that is possible for God Most High, whether that meaning is easily identifiable or not. That is the solution to this problem.

You might say, "But why did he not simply use unambiguous words which do not suggest those incorrect meanings at all on the surface level, even to a layperson, a child, or a fool?"

The answer is that he spoke to people in the language of the Arabs, and their language simply does not contain unambiguous words that express those meanings. What would be the use of presenting texts in a language if even the originators of that language could not understand them? What would be the nature of such texts? On the contrary, these are meanings that are understood by the light of Prophethood innately, or by the light of the intellect after much study and contemplation; and that only for only some of them, not all. And since there were no exact words to express those meanings, it was necessary to borrow words that were already established in the language in order to be able to speak it. It is the same for us when we are forced to say, "This issue appears different from that one," borrowing the notion of "appearance," which usually refers to physical bodies, since the founders of the language did not provide us with an unambiguous word denoting the form and structure of an issue. This may be because the

originators did not know what an "issue" was, or did know it but never spoke of it, or spoke of it but did not use a special word for it but instead relied on figurative speech, realizing that they could not create a unique word for every single concept. Concepts are infinite, but words must be finite, which makes it inevitable that some words will have to be used figuratively to denote certain concepts. Therefore, it was enough to invent words for only some, not all; and other languages are much more limited than Arabic in this regard.

In such cases, any person wishing to speak in the language of a people is forced to use figurative borrowings in order to express himself, since he cannot go outside the bounds of their language. How should it be otherwise, when we allow the use of figures of speech even when there is no need to do so, relying on context? We make no distinction between saying "Zayd sat above 'Amr" and "Zayd sat closer to the front than 'Amr," or between "Baghdad is in the jurisdiction of the Caliph" and "Baghdad is in the Caliph's hand," as long as we are speaking with intelligent people. It is not possible to protect these words from the delusions of children or ignorant people, and to take pains to avoid using them would lead to speech that is stilted, mindless, and dull.

You might say, "But why did he not lift the veil from the Essence of God, and say that He exists but is not a body, substance, or accident; that He is neither inside the world nor outside it, neither connected nor separated; and that He is not in any place or direction, but absent from all directions? After all, that is what some people hold to be the truth, and it was certainly possible to state it as plainly as the theologians did. The Prophet's ﷺ powers of expression were not lacking, nor did his desire to reveal the truth ever flag, nor was his knowledge deficient."

Our response is that those who believe this to be the truth argue that if he had phrased it this way, people would have been averse to

accepting it; indeed, they would have rejected it outright and said, "This is impossible!" They would have strayed into the denial of the divine Attributes (*ta'ṭīl*); and there is no good to be found in an expression of transcendence that is so direct and forceful that it causes almost everyone to stray into that, save for a rare few. The Messenger of God ﷺ was sent to call mankind to salvation in the Hereafter, as "a mercy unto the worlds." Why would he utter something that would spell ruin for most people? He was commanded to speak to people on the level of their intellects; as he ﷺ said, "When someone speaks to people of something they do not understand, he causes tribulation for some of them," or words to that effect.¹

You might say, "If too forceful an expression of transcendence risks causing people to deny the Attributes, then surely using those ambiguous phrases poses the similar risk of causing people to liken God to creation."

Our response has two aspects. The first is that the former poses a risk to the majority, while the latter poses a risk to a minority only. The less harmful option may be tolerated, but the more harmful option must be avoided.

The second aspect is that the delusion of likening God to creation is easier to cure than the delusion of denying the Attributes, for it is enough simply to say for each of these outward expressions, *Nothing is like unto Him* (Qur'ān 42:11), and that He is not a body or anything like a body. As for establishing the existence of a being in the ultra-transcendent manner described above, it is very difficult to do, and not even one out of a thousand people would accept it, especially among the unlettered Arab people.

You might say, "Does mankind's inability to understand such matters provide an excuse for the Prophets to lead them to believe things that are not actually true, in order that they at least believe in the Divine? Does it excuse, for example, leading them to believe

that God Most High is settled upon the Throne, that He resides in Heaven, and that He is above them spatially as well as in status?"

Our response is: Perish the thought that any truthful Prophet would describe God Most High incorrectly, and lead humanity to believe that false description! On the contrary, the limitations of mankind necessitate that they be told only that which they are able to understand, while what they cannot understand must be kept from them. Therefore, the Prophet does not teach them such things, but withholds them and addresses them only to those who are able to comprehend them. In this way the limitations and deficiencies of mankind are surmounted. There is no need to deliberately impart a false understanding to them, least of all regarding the Attributes of God Most High. Nevertheless, it is necessary to use figures of speech that might cause unintelligent people to err in their understanding, due to the limitations of language and needs of communication. But for the Prophets deliberately to cause people to understand things incorrectly is simply impossible, whether there be any supposed benefit in doing so or not.

You might say, "But those who liken God to creation are ignorant because of the words he used, and he must have known that the literal implication of his words would be conducive to their remaining ignorant, and he must have been content with that. As long as he used words that would lead to ignorance and confusion and was content to do so, it makes no difference whether his intention was to cause ignorance or not. Either way, ignorance resulted, and he knew this and was content with it."

Our response is that we do not admit that the ignorance of those who liken God to creation is the result of his words. On the contrary, it is caused by their shortcomings in acquiring knowledge of the divine transcendence and how it has precedence when considering the meaning of the words. Had they attained the knowledge that they were required to, and given it precedence over investigating the

words, they would not have fallen into ignorance. Likewise, someone who has knowledge of the divine transcendence will not fall into ignorance when he hears that the Ka'ba is the House of God; and someone who knows what an "issue" is will not be confused when he hears it says that an issue "appears" to be such-and-such.

Their duty is to gain this knowledge, and then to consult learned people if they have any doubts about it, and then to restrain themselves from engaging in interpretation, and to hold themselves to the bounds of transcendence once the scholars have explained it to them. If they do not fulfill this duty, they will fall into ignorance. The Lawgiver was indeed aware that people are naturally indolent, lazy, and overcurious regarding things that are not their business; but that does not mean that he was content with this, nor that he aimed to spread ignorance. On the contrary, he was content with the decree of God Most High and the fates that He apportioned. As God says: *And the Word of your Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I will surely fill Hell with jinn and men together!'* (Qur'ān 11:119); *Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community; but they will continue to differ, save those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for that did He create them* (Qur'ān 11:118-119); *And had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed altogether. Would you then compel people to become believers? No soul can believe without God's leave, and He lays defilement upon those who will not use reason* (Qur'ān 10:99-100). Such is the utter divine dominance over the innate nature of man; and it is not within the power of the Prophets to change the Way of God, for it cannot be changed.

How Is One to Answer Such Questions?

You might ask, "But what is the use of refraining from asking or answering such questions, now that these disputes have spread

throughout the lands and people have become divided into sects? How is one to answer if asked about such things?"

Our answer is that one should say what Mālik رحمته الله said when asked about the issue of the "settling" (*istiwā*), and answer: "The settling is known, but the modality is unknown. Believing in it is a duty, and asking about it is heretical innovation." We should remember this reply whenever laypeople ask about such matters, so that we may bar the way to confusion and not expose the masses to peril.

You might ask, "So if a person asks us what we have to say about 'settling,' 'above,' the 'hand,' or the 'fingers,' how are we to respond?"

Our reply is that the way to respond is to say that the truth is what the Messenger ﷺ said and what God Most High said, and that He spoke the truth when He said, *The Compassionate settled upon the Throne* (Qur'ān 20:5); and we know for certain that He did not mean the kind of sitting or settling that a body does, but we do not know what He meant, nor are we required to know.

Likewise, He spoke the truth when He said, *He is the Dominant above His servants* (Qur'ān 6:18), and it is impossible that this could mean "above" in the spatial sense, for He existed before space itself did, and He is now as He ever was. As for the question of what He actually meant, we do not know, and neither we nor you are required to know.

Likewise, we say that it is not permitted to affirm a hand or fingers for God in an unqualified sense, but only to say exactly what the Messenger of God ﷺ said in the manner in which he said it, without addition, subtraction, combination, decontextualization, interpretation, or translation, as we saw earlier. Therefore, when he said that "God kneaded the clay of Adam with His hand," or that "The believer's heart is between two of the All-Merciful's fingers," we believe in this, and we do not add or subtract anything

but simply relate it as it was transmitted. At the same time, we are certain that it cannot mean the limb made of flesh, blood, and bone, nor any other kind of body.

And if someone asks whether the Qur'ān is eternal or created, we answer that it is uncreated; as the Prophet ﷺ said, "The Qur'ān is the uncreated Word of God."² If asked whether its letters are eternal or not, we answer that this was not an issue that the Companions discussed, and so to inquire into it would be an innovation, so we should not ask about it. If one has the misfortune to find oneself in a place where gross anthropomorphism is the norm, and where they pronounce unbelief upon anyone who refuses to say that the letters of the Qur'ān are eternal, then if one is forced to answer one may say, "If by the letters you mean the Qur'ān itself, then the Qur'ān is eternal. If you mean something other than the Qur'ān itself or the Attributes of God Most High, then everything besides God Most High and His Attributes is temporal." Say no more than that, because it is extremely difficult to make laypeople understand the truth of this issue.

They might object that the Prophet ﷺ said that whoever recites a letter of the Qur'ān will receive such-and-such reward, which implies that the letters belong to the Qur'ān; and since he said that the Qur'ān is uncreated, this means that the letters must be eternal. Our reply is that we will not say more than the Messenger ﷺ said, which is firstly that the Qur'ān is uncreated, and secondly that the Qur'ān has letters. As for whether or not the letters are eternal, that is a third thing for which there is no report from the Prophet ﷺ, and therefore we will say nothing about it, because we would not wish to say more than the Messenger ﷺ did. If they claim that the third thing is implied by the first two, we reply that this is a matter of analogy and inference; and we demonstrated earlier that there is no room for analogy and inference in these matters. We are obliged to keep to the text without inferring anything from it.

The same applies if they say that the Arabic of the Qur'ān must be eternal because the Prophet said that the Qur'ān itself is eternal, and because God Most High says, *Truly We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān* (Qur'ān 12:2), which means that Arabic must be eternal. Our reply is that it is true that the Qur'ān is eternal because the Messenger ﷺ said it, but the claim regarding the Arabic of the Qur'ān is another matter, for there is no text stating that it is eternal, and therefore it is not obligatory to say so.

That is how the masses and the gross anthropomorphists are to be restrained from meddling with the texts and steered away from engaging in analogy and inference. Indeed, we could be even more restrictive and say that if the Prophet said, "The Qur'ān is the uncreated Word of God," this does not give us the right to say, "The Qur'ān is eternal," since he did not use the word "eternal," and there is a difference between "uncreated" and "eternal." One could call a person's words "uncreated" in the sense that they are not constructed, and the word *makhḷūq* (created) can also mean *mukhtaliq* (contrived). This gives the term "uncreated" shades of meaning that are not presented in "eternal" (*qadīm*)—which means they are not the same. Our belief in the eternity of the Qur'ān is not based on this word alone, for this word should not be changed, substituted, interpreted, or altered. We must believe that it is true in the meaning in which he intended it. Anyone who says that the letter is uncreated without providing a text to prove it is guilty of innovation and addition, and has strayed far from the way of the early Muslims.

The Four Levels of Existence

You might say, "Another well-known issue is the claim that faith is beginninglessly eternal. How should we answer if asked about this?"

Our reply is that if we had the power to, we would prevent people from asking such ridiculous and pointless questions, and tell them that it is an innovation to do so. But if we were to find ourselves in their lands and the issue were forced, we would answer: "What do you mean by faith? If you mean something that is of the Qur'ān or the Attributes of God Most High, then all of His Attributes are eternal. If you mean something that is part of the knowledge and attributes of mankind, then all of their attributes are created. If you mean something that is an attribute neither of creation nor of the Creator, that is something unintelligible and inconceivable. If a thing cannot even be conceived of, how could one know whether it is eternal or temporal?"

The best thing is to rebuke the questioner and refuse to answer, for that is just what the early Muslims did, and one may not depart from their way unless it is strictly necessary—in which case that is how to reply. If our interlocutor is intelligent and able to understand subtle distinctions, we will disclose the truth of the matter and cure him of his confusion regarding the Qur'ān. What we would say is as follows.

Everything has four levels of existence: existence among entities, existence in the mind, existence in language, and existence as written on a page. For example, fire exists in a furnace. It also exists in the mind and imagination, in the form of knowledge of its appearance and nature. It also exists in language, in the form of the word that denotes it. It also exists on a page when the characters that denote it are written. Burning is a special attribute of fire, just as eternity is for the Qur'ān and the Word of God Most High. Of these four levels of existence, it is the fire in the furnace that burns, not the one in the mind, in language, or on the page. If the fire on the tongue or the page could burn, it would burn them. So, if someone said that fire burns, we would agree that indeed it does; but if they said that the word "fire" burns, we would disagree. If

they said that the letters F, I, R, and E burn, we would again disagree, just as we would if they said that the written forms of these letters upon the page burn. However, if they said that the thing denoted by the spoken word "fire" burns, and the thing denoted by the written word "fire" burns, we would agree that it does, because what these spoken and written words denote is the thing in the furnace, and the thing in the furnace burns. Likewise, to say that the Word of God is eternal is akin to saying that fire burns.

The entity that is called the Qur'ān also exists on four levels. The first, which is the essential one, is its existence that subsists with the Essence of God Most High. This level is like the existence of fire in the furnace. God is beyond compare, but such similes are necessary to help people understand. Eternality is a special property of this existence. The second level is its cognitive existence in our minds when it is taught to us and before we speak it out loud; then it exists upon our tongues when we give voice to it; and then it exists on the page when written there. If we are asked about the knowledge of the Qur'ān that exists in our minds before we say it out loud, we say that our knowledge is our attribute. It is created, though its object is eternal, just as our knowledge of fire and its form impressed in our imagination does not burn, but its object does burn. If we are asked about our voices, the movement of our tongues, and our utterance, we say that this is the attribute of our tongues, and our tongues are created. Its sound comes into existence afterwards, and something that comes after a temporal thing must itself be temporal. However, the thing that we are saying, invoking, reciting, and reading with these temporal sounds is itself eternal, just as when we say the letters that compose the word "fire" with our tongues, the thing denoted by the letters we are speaking burns, though our voices and the sounds we make do not burn.

Now someone might say, "But the letters of 'fire' are an expression of the fire itself." To this we reply that if it were true, the

letters of "fire" would burn; and if the letters of the Qur'ān were an expression of the very thing being recited, they would be eternal. The same applies to the letters of "fire" written on the page: the thing that they denote burns, because what they denote is fire itself; but the letters that form the word do not burn, since on the page they do not possess the property of burning.

These, then, are the four levels of existence that the masses do not discern, nor are they able to comprehend the details and special properties of each one. That is why we do not delve into this issue with them—not because we are ignorant of these truths or their details. In the furnace, fire can be said to ignite, burn, and die out; upon the tongue, it could be called Persian, Turkish, or Arabic, and its letters could be counted. But in the furnace, it is neither Turkish nor Arabic, and upon the tongue it neither ignites nor dies out. Written upon the page, it could be described as red, green, or black, and written in the calligraphic styles of *muḥaqqaq*, *thuluth*, *riqā'*, or *naskh*. On the tongue, none of these descriptions can apply. The word "fire" applies to what is in the furnace, what is in the heart, what is on the tongue, and what is on the page, but this is because the word is shared among them. It means what is in the furnace in reality, and what is in the mind as knowledge—not in reality, but as an image that portrays what fire is, just as the image in the mirror can be called a man or a fire—not literally, but as an image portraying a real man or a real fire. The word upon the tongue also shares this name in a third sense: it denotes what is in the mind. This differs with linguistic usage, while the first two do not differ.ⁱ Then what is on the page is also called "fire"—but in a fourth sense, which is that it is a set of symbols representing the utterance of the tongue.

i In other words: people may have different words for fire, but they all imagine and experience fire in the same way regardless of what they call it.

If you understand the way the name of the Qur'ān, fire, and everything else is shared among these four levels of existence, when you hear Traditions stating that the Qur'ān is in [God's] servant's heart, or on the page, or on the reciter's tongue, or that it is an Attribute of the Essence of God Most High, you will understand them all and see their truth. You will find no contradiction among them, and you will believe them all, with full comprehension of their meaning. These facts are at once obvious and obscure; there is nothing more obvious to the intelligent person, but nothing more obscure to the unintelligent. An unintelligent person ought to be forbidden from delving into them, and told: "Say that the Qur'ān is uncreated, and then say no more. Add nothing, subtract nothing, and look no further into the matter." An intelligent person, however, can be cured of this confusion in an instant; but he must be advised not to speak of it to other laypeople, lest he burden them with more than they can bear.

The same applies to all other texts with problematic literal meanings. They contain truths that are obvious to people of inner vision, but are confusing to blind laypeople. One must never suppose that the illustrious early Muslims were unable to recognize these truths. They may not have taken pains to develop the terminology to express them, but they were aware of them, and aware that ordinary people cannot handle them, which is why they were silent about them and encouraged the masses to do likewise. This was exactly the right course of action. By "the illustrious early Muslims," I do not necessarily mean the ones who were the most prominent or famous, but the ones who had the greatest capacity to perceive profound meanings and uncover mysteries. The masses might not understand this, and might imagine that the most famous people are always the greatest, which is another cause of misguidance.

The Levels of Belief

You might say, "If a layperson is not permitted to investigate and scrutinize these matters, he will not know the proof; but if someone does not know the proof, this means he is ignorant of what it proves. God Most High commands all of His servants to know Him, first through faith and belief in His existence, secondly in His transcendence beyond temporality and comparability, thirdly in His oneness, and fourthly in His Attributes of knowledge, power, will, and so on. Now these things are not intuitively obvious, which means that they must be sought; and any knowledge that is sought cannot be acquired unless it is snared in the net of proof. This means that the seeker must examine the proofs to ascertain their evidentiary value and the manner in which they are used to arrive at the correct conclusions. This cannot be done without knowing the requirements of demonstrative proof and the correct way to systemize premises and conclusions. By degrees, this must inevitably lead to a comprehensive study of the science of theology and logical argument. Furthermore, it is obligatory for the layperson to believe the Messenger ﷺ in all that he conveyed; and again, this is not something that is intuitively obvious, as he was a human being like any other. There must therefore be proof to show that he was different from those people who made false claims to Prophethood. This can only be done by examining his miracles, which requires knowledge of the true nature of the miracle, its requirements, and all the other issues of Prophethood; and this constitutes an entire third of the science of theology."

Our reply to this is that what is required of mankind is to have faith in these things. Faith means belief so firm and unwavering that one does not entertain even the possibility of error in it. This firm belief is attained on six levels.

(1) The first level, which is also the highest, is that which is attained by comprehensive proof whose requirements are all fulfilled, and whose foundations and premises are properly laid down stage by stage, word by word, until there is no room whatsoever for the slightest doubt. That is the ultimate goal, but in a single era there may be only one or two individuals who reach it; and there may be eras in which no one reaches it at all. If salvation depended on knowledge of this order, very few people would be saved.

(2) The second level is that which is gained through formal theological proofs based on premises that are admitted and believed because of their repute among the foremost people of knowledge, the repugnance associated with denying them, and people's aversion to challenging them. For some issues and for some people, this level can also produce belief so firm that the one who holds it cannot imagine it being contradicted.

(3) The third level is belief acquired through rhetorical proofs, by which I mean those arguments which are customarily used in debates and public addresses. In most people this produces belief that is elementary and immediate, as long as the one exposed to them is not already a partisan of an opposing doctrine, or a die-hard contrarian who doubts all that he hears and is lacking in any aversion to dogmatic debate. Most of the proofs in the Qur'ān are of this order.

An example of a patent proof that produces belief is to say that a household cannot be properly managed if there are two managers: *Had there been gods other than God in the two realms, both would have surely gone to ruin* (Qur'ān 21:22). Any heart that still retains its primordial nature and has not been confused by exposure to debate will instantly understand this proof, and acquire firm belief in the oneness of the Creator. However, if a debater confuses that heart by saying, "It is not impossible that the world could have two gods who agree and cooperate in its

direction, and never disagree," that might confuse it and unsettle its belief. Those with limited minds may then find it difficult to resolve this problem, and become overwhelmed with doubt that cannot be repelled.

Another patent proof is that anyone capable of creation would be all the more capable of repeating it; as God Most High says, *He Who originated them the first time will give them life* (Qur'ān 36:79). Any ordinary person who hears this, whether intelligent or not, will immediately believe it and say, "Yes! Repeating it is not more difficult than doing it the first time; it is easier." But even so, he could be confused by a question that he finds difficult to answer. A comprehensive proof is one that produces belief after all questions have been addressed, so that no further questions remain; but belief can be attained before this stage is reached.

(4) The fourth level is belief in what one hears from someone of whom one thinks highly because he is well-respected among people. When a person thinks highly of his father, his teacher, or a prominent virtuous man, and that person tells him that someone has died, or that someone has arrived after an absence, or some such thing, he will instantly believe it so firmly that there is no room for doubt in his heart. His basis for this belief is the high opinion he has of his informant. When a person known for truthfulness, piety, and God-consciousness such as [Abū Bakr] al-Ṣiddiq رضي الله عنه stated that the Messenger of God ﷺ had said something, a great many people believed it firmly and accepted it absolutely, on no basis other than their high opinion of him. If someone of such stature presented a layperson with a matter of doctrine and said, "The Creator of the world is One, and He is All-Knowing and All-Powerful, and He sent Muḥammad ﷺ as a Messenger," he would believe him at once without entertaining any doubt in what he says. That is the nature of children's belief in what their parents and teachers say. They

hear matters of doctrine from them and believe in them, and they go on believing in them without requiring arguments and proofs.

(5) The fifth level is the belief which the heartⁱ immediately embraces upon hearing something alongside certain qualifying statements which when closely scrutinized are less than definitive, but which are sufficient to produce firm belief in the hearts of the masses. For example, if it is common knowledge that the local governor is ill, and then the sound of weeping and wailing comes from his home, and one of his servants is heard to say that he has died, an ordinary person will be convinced that he is dead and will act accordingly. He will not entertain the notion that the servant may have been guessing, or that the weeping and wailing may have been a reaction to the governor fainting, or his sickness worsening, or some other cause. Such notions are unlikely and do not cross the minds of ordinary people. As a result, firm beliefs may take hold in their hearts. Many a Bedouin looked upon the radiant face of the Messenger of God ﷺ, heard his beautiful words, and witnessed his kindly character, and developed firm faith and unshakeable belief in him for that reason alone, without demanding a miracle from him to support it, or considering its evidentiary nature.

(6) The sixth level is when one hears something that agrees with one's nature and character, and so one believes in it immediately for this reason alone, regardless of one's opinion of the person who says it or any extenuating context, but simply due to its affinity with one's nature. If a person eagerly wishes for his enemy to die or be slain or deposed, he will believe at the slightest indication that any and all of these have occurred, and will go on believing it with firm conviction. But if he were told the same about his friend, or given any news that contradicted his desires and hopes, he would

i Reading *qalb* from the Tawfiqiyya edition, rather than *'ilm* (knowledge) from the Minhāj edition.

be very reluctant to accept it. This is the weakest and lowest level of belief, because all the preceding levels are based on some kind of proof, even if it is something weak such as a clarifying context, a high opinion of the speaker, or some other such thing. These are tokens that the ordinary person deems to be proofs, and so they act upon him as proofs.

Now that you know the levels of belief, know also that the faith of the masses is based upon these causes. The highest level for them is the proofs of the Qur'ān and other arguments of that nature, which stir the heart towards belief. Ordinary people should not be taken beyond the bounds of the Qur'ān's proofs and other such patent and convincing arguments, which settle the heart and draw it towards tranquility and belief. Anything else is beyond their capacity. Most people develop their faith in childhood, their belief being based solely on conformity to their parents and teachers because of their good opinion of them, and how they praise themselves and are praised by others, and how they strongly rebuke them for contradicting them, and tell them grave tales of what befalls those who do not believe what they do—tales of the Jew who was turned into a dog in his grave, or the Rāfiqite who was turned into a pig. They tell the children of stories, dreams, and other similar accounts that make their souls recoil from such a fate and desire to avoid it, until doubt is altogether dispelled from their hearts. Teaching in childhood is like engraving upon stone. The child then grows up with those beliefs and continues to affirm them in his heart. When he reaches adulthood, he retains those convictions firmly and without the stain of doubt. This is why you see that whether children are Christian, Zoroastrian, or Muslim, they grow up with their parents' beliefs and firm convictions about truth and falsehood, to which they hold so strongly that they would rather be torn limb from limb

than repudiate them, even though they have never heard any real or formal proofs for them.

Likewise, you see men and women taken as prisoners of war with no knowledge of Islam, but after spending time in captivity among Muslims and keeping their company for some length of time, and witnessing their inclination toward Islam, they begin to incline with them, share their beliefs, and adopt their customs. They do so out of conformity and the desire to imitate others, which is a natural disposition in mankind, especially in children and the young. This shows us that firm belief does not depend upon research or the thorough examination of proofs.

Faith Is What Matters.

You might say, "I do not deny that firm belief can be attained in the hearts of the masses by these means, but that does not in any way amount to knowledge. However, mankind is commanded to have true knowledge—not merely belief that is more like ignorance since it does not differentiate between truth and falsehood."

Our reply is that this claim is simply mistaken. The salvation of mankind lies in firm belief in what is true, so that the image of truth is engraved upon their hearts. Then when they die and the veil is lifted, and they see that things are just as they had believed they were, they will not be disgraced and burned by the fire of disappointment and shame first, and by the fire of Hell second. When the image of truth is engraved upon the heart, it does not matter how it got there. Whether it was by true proof, formal proof, convincing proof, acceptance based on a high opinion of someone, or no more than blind conformity, does not matter. What matters is that the belief is true. If someone believes the truth about God and His Attributes, His Scriptures, His Messengers, and the Last Day, as they really are, then he will be saved, even if this belief is

not based on reasoned theological proof. God Most High asks no more of His servants than that.

This is a matter of unequivocal fact known through mass-transmitted reports from the Messenger of God ﷺ, which tell of how the Bedouins would come to him, he would present the faith to them, and they would accept it and then go back to tend their camels and their herds. He never required them to contemplate the miracle and its evidentiary value, nor to contemplate the temporality of the world and the necessary existence of a Maker, nor the proofs for His oneness and the other Attributes. If most of the uncivilized Arabs had been required to do that, they would need a great deal of time to grasp it. Yet the fact is that one of them simply took the Prophet at his oath, asking, "By God, did God send you as a Messenger?" He replied, "By God, God sent me as a Messenger," and the man took him at his word and departed (Bukhārī 63). Another came to him and said after just one look at him, "By God, this is not the face of a liar!" (Tirmidhī 2485). There are innumerable other accounts of this sort. What is more, during his era and the era of his Companions, many thousands used to convert to Islam during campaigns, most of whom would not have been able to understand the proofs of theology; and even those who could have understood them would have had to give up their professions and spent much time under the instruction of a teacher. Yet it is not related that any such thing took place.

It is therefore a proven fact that God Most High does not ask any more of mankind than faith and firm belief in what He says, regardless of how that belief is attained. Of course, we do not deny that a person who possesses knowledge is on a higher level than one who conforms blindly, but one who conforms blindly is just as much of a believer as he is.

You might say, "But then how does the blind conformer differentiate between himself and a Jew who blindly conforms?" Our

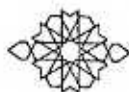
reply is that the blind conformist does not know what blind conformity is, or that he is engaged in it. He believes that he possesses true realization and knowledge, and he does not doubt in his belief. He has no need for such differentiation, since he is already certain that his opponent is wrong, and he is right. His belief may also be supported by certain contexts and proofs, even if they be weak, which he sees as conveying a special distinction upon him and differentiating him from his opponent. If the Jew believes the exact same thing about himself, this does not cause any confusion for the one whose beliefs are correct. Even someone whose belief is based upon knowledge and contemplation claims that he has the edge over the Jew because of proof, and he is not driven to doubt by the fact that the Jewish theologian claims the exact same thing for himself; nor does the confident blind conformist have any doubt. If his belief is not shaken by doubt when his opponents makes their counter-claims, his faith is strong enough.

Have you ever seen a layperson become dejected and glum because he cannot tell the difference between his conformity and that of a Jew? Such a notion does not even occur to ordinary folk. If it did and they spoke it aloud, others would laugh at them and say, "What is this nonsense? Are truth and falsehood equal, so that I need someone to explain to me the distinction, that they are wrong and I am right? I already know without doubt that I am right! Why should I look for the distinction when it is already obvious?" That is the attitude of assured conformists. Even the Jew whose beliefs are false does not suffer from this problem, because he feels certain that his side is right. Why would a conforming Muslim suffer from it, when his beliefs are true in the sight of God Most High? This demonstrates decisively that their beliefs are firm, and that the religion does not ask any more of them than that.

You might ask, "What if a layman is argumentative and stubborn, refuses to conform blindly, and is not convinced by the patent and intuitive proofs of the Qur'ān? What is to be done?"

Our reply is that such a person is sick, since his nature inclines away from the healthy primordial disposition of man. We must therefore examine his character. If we find that argumentativeness and importunity dominate his nature, we should not bother to debate with him; and if he seeks to argue with us about the tenets of faith, we must rid the earth of him. If we intuit that he has the potential for guidance and acceptance if we take him beyond obvious arguments into more subtle proofs, then we should treat him with those remedies to the best of our ability, medicating him with bitter debate and sweet evidence. In sum, we should strive to dispute with him in the manner that is best, as God Most High commands. But our license to employ this degree of medication does not mean that the door to theology should be opened to the masses. Medicines are used only for the sick, who are the minority, and something that is used out of necessity to treat the sick must be kept safely away from the healthy. Sound primordial disposition is ready to accept faith without the need for argument or examination of the minutiae of proofs. Using medicine on the healthy is just as harmful as denying it to the sick. Each thing must be put in its proper place. God Most High commanded His Prophet ﷺ: *Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel, and dispute with them in the manner that is best* (Qur'ān 16:125). Some people are to be called to with wisdom, others with good counsel, and others are debated in the best manner. We have explained these categories in *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* (The Just Balance), so we need not repeat it at length here.





ENDNOTES

GOD-GIVEN KNOWLEDGE (*al-Risāla al-laduniyya*)

Chapter 1: The Nobility of Knowledge

- 1 Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab* 1543.

Chapter 2: The Human Soul and Spirit

- 1 A hadith: see Bayhaqī, *Zuhd* 343.
- 2 With a similar wording in Muslim 1887.

Chapter 6: The True Meaning of God-Given Knowledge, and How It Is Acquired

- 1 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf* 34344.

THE ASCENSIONS OF THE TRAVELERS (*Ma'ārij al-sālikin*)

Second Ascension

- 1 With a similar wording in Muslim 1887.

Afterword: Absolute Happiness

- 1 Lines attributed to Tirmidhī ibn Ḥakīm (d. 125/742).

PROTECTION OF THE MASSES FROM THEOLOGY

(*Iljām al-'awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām*)

Chapter 1: The Creed of the Early Muslims

- 1 Narrated by al-Daylamī (*Musnad* 2195) with this wording, and by al-Tirmidhī (*Sunan* 3233) with a similar wording.
- 2 Bukhārī 5063 with a similar wording.
- 3 Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Tūsī, *Kitāb al-Luma'* p. 57.

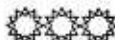
Chapter 2: Proving That the Way of the Early Muslims Is the Truth

- 1 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* 6166.
- 2 Dārimī, *Musnad* 2111, presented as a saying of Ibn Mas'ūd.
- 3 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' bayān al-'ilm* 2026, presented as a saying of al-Sha'bī.
- 4 Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh Baghdād* 4/380.

- 5 Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr* 188.
- 6 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* 8/199.
- 7 Aḥmad, *Faḍā’il al-Ṣaḥāba* 676.
- 8 Hākim, *Mustadrak* 4637.

Chapter 3: Various Useful Points and Questions Relevant to This Subject

- 1 Daylamī, *Musnad al-firdaws* 5644.
- 2 Daylamī, *Musnad al-firdaws* 4668.



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